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There's a large amount of debate currently as to whether the Wii U is going to be a success or not. Will the heaving fan-base of mums, dads and grandparents be on hand to support Nintendo this time around? Will the introduction of more triple-A multiformat titles mean that this is a console that truly caters for the whole family, or is it just a way to replay games you completed on your 360 with a different control system? Clearly only time will tell, but it's becoming more difficult to tell what appeals to players.

Now more than ever it's clear that there are many types of gamers. Even the core gamers, once considered a solid unit, have been split. The recent erratic scoring of *Hitman: Absolution* is a good example of this. Here we have a game that can be played many ways. The 'proper' way demands patience, trial and error, and numerous restarts – I believe that played in this way the game is excellent, however it's clear that many see those very elements as irritants. To these people the game doesn't stand a hope of scoring well. The divide is far greater than simply hardcore and casual nowadays and the balancing act that any new console, including Wii U, must succeed in will likely determine the appeal.

Enjoy the issue.

Rick Porter
EDITOR IN CHIEF




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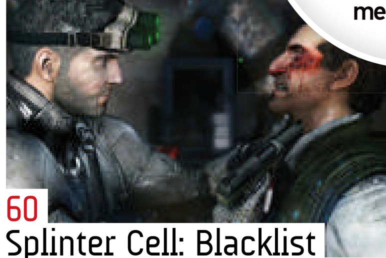
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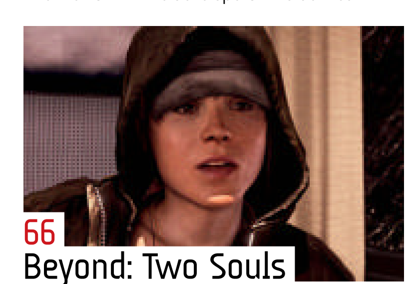
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(A GREAT DISTURBANCE)

A New Hope?

→ What does Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm mean for the future of Star Wars? **games™** investigates

On 30 October 2012, there was a great disturbance in the Force. Millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror, reacting to the announcement that George Lucas, creator of *Star Wars*, had sold Lucasfilm and its subsidiaries and properties to Disney for a cool $4.05 billion. "I've always believed that *Star Wars* could live beyond me, and I thought it was important to set up the transition during my lifetime," said Lucas in a press release. "I'm confident that with Lucasfilm under the leadership of Kathleen Kennedy, and having a new home within the Disney organisation, *Star Wars* will certainly live on and flourish for many generations to come."

Predictably, the internet reacted to the news with its usual knee-jerk cynicism, immediately assuming that Disney's influence on the series would be geared towards money-grabbing merchandising opportunities and that the new films will further sully the once-revered *Star Wars* name.

We know there's reason for more optimism than that, of course. Disney has proven that it knows how to handle a respected franchise with its work on *The Avengers* and the related films, for one. With a good director to go along with the recent hiring of *Toy Story* scribe Michael Arndt, there's definite potential for *Episode VII*.

Less confidently predicted, however, is what the acquisition of Lucasfilm will mean for its subsidiary LucasArts – the videogame arm of the Lucas empire responsible for everything from *Maniac Mansion* to *Knights Of The Old Republic*.

Lucasfilm and Disney have remained coy on the subject, **games™**'s attempts to elicit a response from the PR department being met with a reticent, "At this time, everything is business as usual and we just don't have anything to contribute to the story." That's not to say that the firm's actions outside the PR and marketing department don't tell an interesting story, however, with the company higher-ups offering broad allusions as to the direction they wish to steer the game development side of the business.

Above George Lucas in 2010, posing with *Star Wars* versions of Disney characters to mark the closure of Walt Disney World's Star Tours attraction for its first major renovation since it opened in 1987. On its debut, Star Tours was the first non-Disney property to appear in a Disney park. Little did we know…

DURING A CONFERENCE call to investors regarding the acquisition, Disney CEO and chairman Bob Iger confirmed that the company is "likely to focus more on social and mobile more than we are on console", although went on to add that Disney will look at console games "opportunistically", using licensing deals to allow other companies to create *Star Wars* titles.

DATA STREAM → SATORU IWATA HAS APOLOGISED OVER THE LENGTHY LAUNCH DAY NETWORK PATCH

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Your guide to the essential stories

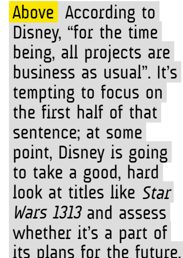
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> "We'll look opportunistically at console, most likely in licensing rather than publishing"
>
> Bob Iger, Disney CEO and chairman



It's not a hugely surprising direction for the company, given its actions over the last few years. Disney began restructuring in 2010, its interactive division swinging its attention away from console releases and instead toward social and mobile games. "We've seen a pretty big shift in games from console to what I'll call multiplatform, everything from mobile apps to social networking games," said Iger at the time. "It's our goal to not only be profitable, but obviously to get there by shifting our investment and reducing our investment too. We probably will end up investing less on the console side than we have because of the shift we're seeing in consumption and have a presence, albeit with probably less investment, in terms of game manufacturing on some of the newer platforms."

THE IMPACT OF this restructuring was first witnessed when Disney starting closing studios in 2011, shutting the doors of *Split/Second* developer Black Rock and *Tron Evolution* creator Propaganda Games, and then cutting staff both internally at Disney Interactive and at Utah-based subsidiary Avalanche Software.

Disney confirmed it was restructuring "as part of setting a strategic direction for future success in the digital space", and it's worked. In November 2012 Disney announced it had lost $216 million for the fiscal year ending 29 September compared to $308 million year-over-year. The firm attributed the reduced loss directly to the renewed focus on mobile titles in lieu of console releases, noting most gaming revenue was derived from iOS and Android releases such as *Gardens Of Time*, *Temple Run: Brave* and *Where's My Water?*. The latter was so successful that it knocked *Angry Birds* from its perch atop the top 25 iTunes list for a whole three weeks.

This, along with the success that Disney has continued to find in the major kids' virtual world *Club Penguin* and the Marvel-themed Facebook game *Avengers Alliance*, suggests that whatever plans the company has for the *Star Wars* series videogame-wise is likely to be more along the lines of *Angry Birds Star Wars* than *The Old Republic*. Social games are where it's at, and that's where *Star Wars* will very much be heading – a space where it's had little to no exposure before this point.

It's worth reiterating, however, that console games won't be ruled out; they just won't be made by LucasArts or Disney themselves, rather licensed to established console development teams. That's the way it's always been, in truth. LucasArts has rarely displayed internal talent when it comes to developing *Star Wars* titles – for every *Super Star Wars* there's a *Masters Of Teräs Käsi*, for every *Shadows Of The Empire* a *Star Wars: Obi-Wan*. To put it bluntly, LucasArts simply isn't very good at *Star Wars* development, faring better when it takes on a publishing and overseeing role and leaves responsibility at the feet of developers such as BioWare, Traveller's Tales and Pandemic. It seems entirely likely that third-party dominance over the series will be set to continue for the larger games, while Disney will focus on the smartphones and social end of the scale. →

Above According to Disney, "for the time being, all projects are business as usual". It's tempting to focus on the first half of that sentence; at some point, Disney is going to take a good, hard look at titles like *Star Wars 1313* and assess whether it's a part of its plans for the future.

Inset With regards to the films, story treatments for *Episodes VII*, *VIII* and *IX* have been written, with "potentially more" coming even after that.



Above For many gamers, *Kinect Star Wars* was likely the first image that jumped to mind when they heard that Disney was acquiring Lucasfilm – once-loved characters reduced to little more than a crass marketing tool.



GARY'S MOD NOW SUPPORTS KINECT, LINK UP YOUR DEVICE TO THE PC AND JOIN THE FUN →



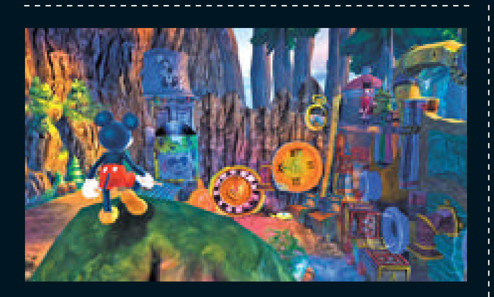
The five games we most want to see

→ Disney's formidable stable of IPs has even more gaming potential…



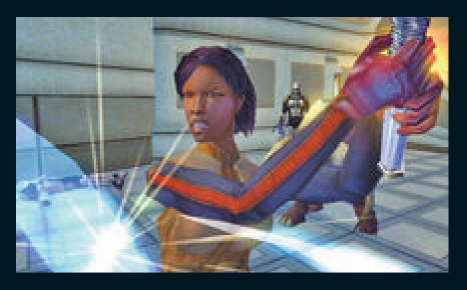
KINGDOM HEARTS III

AN OBVIOUS move would be for Disney to expand its successful Square Enix franchise with the introduction of *Star Wars* characters. There's a whole galaxy there to explore. It's difficult to imagine this not taking place in one form or another, whether it's as a fully fledged sequel or another handheld/mobile spin-off. The latter seems more likely, however, given Disney's focus on social gaming.



A WARREN SPECTOR STAR WARS TITLE

THE ONLY console games that have recently been in development at the House of Mouse are the two *Epic Mickey* releases, neither of which has fared particularly well when it comes to critical response. We'd love to see Disney turn Warren Spector towards the *Star Wars* franchise in a return to his more traditional RPG roots. Perhaps he will do better there than he has with his work on Mickey Mouse.



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC III

THE MOST obvious response when asked what new *Star Wars* game you'd most like to see, but for a reason. The *KOTOR* games are simply the best *Star Wars* titles ever. They've been somewhat eclipsed by BioWare's own *Mass Effect* over the years, which has become a universe-spanning franchise itself. Nevertheless, we'd like to see BioWare put it on the back burner for a while and do a deal with Disney.



NEXT-GEN X-WING/TIE FIGHTER

WHATEVER HAPPENED to the space combat simulation genre? It seems the rise of the FPS and RPG in the late Nineties coincided with its decline, leaving the genre to the indie community. We'd love to see a resurgence of the *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* series come the next generation. Project Aces hasn't been doing so badly on revitalising the *Ace Combat* series, so perhaps it could lend some of its expertise.



ADVENTURE GAMES REVISITED

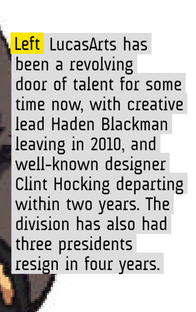
WE'RE NOT necessarily thinking sequels – *Grim Fandango* is a perfect little gem as it is – but we'd love to see more special editions in the same vein as *Monkey Island. Loom, Day Of The Tentacle, Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis, Full Throttle* – a new generation of players deserves to experience them. Whether Disney will consider them capable of turning a profit, however, is another matter.



Right Interactive entertainment accounts for a little less than 20 per cent of Lucasfilm's revenue. As such, the company is likely to focus on merchandising first, then film, then TV, then gaming dead last.

→ There is one last game currently in development at LucasArts, however: the gritty and mature *Star Wars 1313*, which Disney has assured us is still very much in development. At some point in the future, Disney is going to take a good, long look at its assets and make a decision on their fiscal viability. There's every chance *Star Wars 1313* could get the chop, or, if Disney deems it worthy of saving, be farmed out to a third-party developer with more success on the triple-A end of the scale. Whatever happens, it's very likely indeed that it will be the last big-budget *Star Wars* console game we see developed in-house by LucasArts. Perhaps the last title for good – for all we know, Disney may drop the videogames division entirely and keep any mobile and social development it does within the House of Mouse.

AS FOR POTENTIAL new entries into the *Star Wars* series, it's impossible to predict what could come next, although the imagination has a tendency to run away with itself. The potential for the revival of old franchises is tantalising, from the *X-Wing* games through to *Jedi Knight* and *Knights Of The Old Republic*. All eyes will be on Disney to see which franchises – if any – it considers worthy of reviving, and which it's happy to leave by the wayside. If it wants to look for something



Left LucasArts has been a revolving door of talent for some time now, with creative lead Haden Blackman leaving in 2010, and well-known designer Clint Hocking departing within two years. The division has also had three presidents resign in four years.

DATA STREAM → BUNGIE HIT BY ANOTHER LEAK, THIS TIME A USB STICK REVEALS DESTINY FIRST INFO



Left Disney Interactive has never shown a great deal of nous when it comes to publishing. Its handling of *Split/Second* saw the game released in the same week as *Red Dead Redemption* and a week before *Blur* – a marketing decision that crippled the game and all but doomed Black Rock Studio.

new, Disney has access to a treasure trove of books, comics and media from the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe from which to find inspiration for new games. It could hand development duties to any of the larger studios out there too, and with a new generation of consoles on the way there's also an incoming wave of enhanced technology to sell the visual side of *Star Wars* on a whole new level. It's exciting. Although, that said, we should also prepare ourselves for an influx of weak movie tie-ins. With *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit*, *Twilight* and, for Disney, the run of films leading up to *The Avengers*, film studios have learned that money is to be made by regularly rolling franchise movies off the production line. It's very likely that *Star Wars* will follow a similar business model from *Episode VII*'s 2015 release onwards, which means plenty of crossover merchandising opportunities, in turn meaning cheaply made and sub-par videogame tie-ins. It's a reality we simply have to face.

> "Our valuation focused almost entirely on the financial potential of [Star Wars]"
> Disney announcement

AN INTERESTING POINT that's all too easily missed in all this excitement over *Star Wars* is the fact that LucasArts handles other properties too. In addition to the *Indiana Jones* franchise, it has access to a back catalogue that most developers would die for, including *The Secret Of Monkey Island*, *Grim Fandango* and *Full Throttle*, to name but a few. LucasArts has displayed some support of such adventure games in recent years, reviving *Monkey Island* with the special edition releases in 2009 and 2010. Given Disney's renewed focus on the mobile sector where these releases proved popular, it's easy to hope for further updates in a similar vein, but it's also a little naive. Disney has made it very clear what it wanted from the acquisition: *Star Wars*, with little mention of the other myriad properties it now owns. Disney sees *Star Wars* as the big prize, and it's difficult to envision adventure games with limited mass-market appeal making up a big portion of its plans going forward.



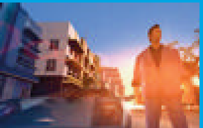
Above Disney's purchase of online social network game developer Playdom in 2010 for $763 million was indicative of its new focus on casual game development.

Nevertheless, it's an exciting time. The only thing that seems clear at this point is that there are more *Star Wars* games coming – largely of the social variety, but likely along with some core-oriented titles to boot. Time will tell which side Disney leans on the hardest. "This transaction combines a world-class portfolio of content including *Star Wars*, one of the greatest family entertainment franchises of all time, with Disney's unique and unparalleled creativity across multiple platforms, businesses and markets to generate sustained growth and drive long-term value," said Iger in a statement. Let's just hope that value doesn't solely manifest itself as *MoistureFarmVille* on Facebook, but also opens the door for a next-generation *Knights Of The Old Republic*. We can dream.

EXTRA CREDIT

> GAME

VICE CITY ARRIVES ON iOS AND ANDROID



■ It's hard to believe that ten years have passed since we first strutted down Vice City's streets. But Rockstar has released an updated port, boasting Retina support, updated character models, improved lighting effects and customisable controls. No word on whether the entire soundtrack has been licensed after a recent dispute concerning a Michael Jackson track. Regardless, our dreams of driving around Ocean Beach on our commute to work are still very much alive.

> TOY

ARKHAM CITY BOARD GAME COMING

■ Cryptozoic, the deck-building game company, has announced a board game based on Rocksteady's hit *Batman* games. Titled *Batman: Arkham City Escape*, it casts one player as the Dark Knight and the other as an assortment of villains. While Batman usually resorts to blunt force trauma, this time he will be engaging villains in a game of strategy.



> TECH

OCULUS RIFT DELAYED

■ The Oculus Rift 3D virtual reality headset has been delayed and will begin shipping sometime early in 2013. The developers have been hit with lengthy wait times for the shell of the kit, and have also taken this opportunity to update many of the components, including the screen size and motion sensor.




EASTER EGGS KEEP POPPING UP IN BATTLEFIELD 3, IS DICE WORKING ON MIRROR'S EDGE 2?




■ Bleszinski is perhaps the closest thing that the game industry has to a celebrity. A fact he prides himself on.

(CLIFF'S NEXT PROJECT)

An Epic Journey

→ Since departing his role at Epic, Gears Of War co-creator Cliff Bleszinski's been busy indeed, his Twitter feed currently spinning a yarn of great interest to anyone who has followed his work over the past 19 years. Here's what we know about his movements since leaving the company he helped build…

On Wednesday 3 October, Cliff Bleszinski took to the Epic Games website to announce his resignation from the company he helped place on the map. "I literally grew up in this business […] and now that I'm grown up, it's time for a much-needed break," read Bleszinski's farewell. "I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with a variety of disciplines, from code to art to marketing and PR – it's been one big, rewarding learning experience."

But where is that experience taking him for what Epic founder Tim Sweeney referred to as "the next chapter of his life"? Unlike other recent high-profile departures such as that of Robert Bowling from Infinity Ward, Peter Molyneux from Microsoft and the good doctors of BioWare, Bleszinski has made little to no clarification as to where he intends to steer his career next, whether gaming-related or not.

That isn't to say he hasn't been busy. Although claiming it's high time for a break, Bleszinski's hardly retreated to his couch for back-to-back gaming sessions and a couple of cold ones. A quick scan of his Twitter reveals that the designer has in fact been touring North America, with his tweets being ambiguous but very, very suggestive.

BEFORE WE GET into that, let's consider what we know for sure about Bleszinski. We know that he has a vested interest in the new virtual reality gaming headset named Oculus Rift, having appeared in the Kickstarter video for the project and professing his desire to integrate Unreal Engine technology into the kit. Despite putting Epic Games in the rear view mirror, Bleszinski has nevertheless professed his continued support of the project, even heading to the Oculus VR headquarters on 25 October to play with the device. It seems that the immersive VR headset will play something of a role in where Bleszinski goes from here.

While on the topic of Kickstarter-funded projects, it's one avenue Bleszinski isn't yet prepared to consider. "Kickstarter is a beautiful thing but I don't see myself doing one any time soon," he tweeted on 5 November, indicating that

DATA STREAM → EA SPORTS PLEDGES $500,000 OF IN-GAME ADVERTS TO MOVEMBER CHARITY

Wandering The Earth

■ "Perhaps I'll wander the earth, like Caine in *Kung Fu*," tweeted Bleszinski shortly after announcing his departure from Epic Games. He hasn't strayed far from this initial proposition, as his travels across the globe have indicated.

7 November Travelled to Seattle, visited Valve

8 November Met with Vince Zampella

17 October Travelled to San Francisco

18 October Visited Double Fine, met with Tim Schafer

22 October Travelled to Los Angeles Visited Activision (Santa Monica) Visited Zoic Studios (Culver City)

25 October Met with David Jaffe

24 October Visited DC Entertainment (Burbank) Visited Legendary Entertainment (Burbank)

23 October Visited Naughty Dog (Santa Monica)

4 November Lunch with Rod Fergusson

27 October Travelled to Pittsburgh

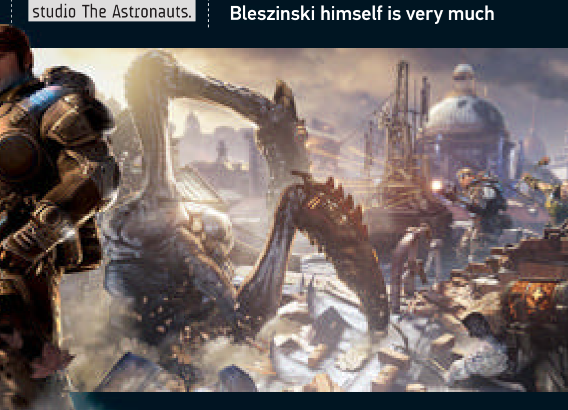
12 November Travelled to Paris

his future will likely remain in the big budget, publisher-driven triple-A market that he himself helped shape. The company Bleszinski has been keeping recently is certainly suggestive of that, at least.

During a stint in San Francisco toward the latter half of October, Bleszinski visited Tim Schafer and Double Fine, playing their new game *The Cave*. Shortly thereafter he headed out to Los Angeles, where he visited the likes of Activision and Naughty Dog and lunched with outspoken game designer David Jaffe. A few days later he met with Rod Fergusson, who himself recently departed Epic Games to take on the role of executive vice president of development at Irrational Games. 7 November saw Bleszinski tweeting from inside the walls of Valve, and then, one day later, a tweet pregnant with potential read: "Dinner with Vince Zampella tonight. If you guys could be the flies on the wall for this one… should be interesting."

"INTERESTING" IS PUTTING it lightly. During his whirlwind tour of the States, Bleszinski has visited not just one but at least *six* representatives of the most influential game developers in the entire world. The story currently being woven by his Twitter account sets the imagination ablaze with potential; could Bleszinski bring his chunky, forceful and altogether satisfying approach to action design to Nathan Drake's next adventure? Could Respawn Entertainment's secretive next title benefit from the crunching violence that's personified Bleszinski's work in the past? Could *Half-Life 3* finally come to light with contributions from the less overt – but nevertheless present – intelligent and restrained side of Bleszinski's approach to design? It's not just videogames that Bleszinski's

> "Dinner with Vince Zampella tonight. If you guys could be the flies on the wall for this one…"
>
> Cliff Bleszinski via Twitter



Below It's interesting to note that key people from *Gears Of War: Judgment* developer People Can Fly, including creative director Adrian Chmielarz, also recently left their roles to form new studio The Astronauts.

been visiting either. Between his stops at videogame developers, the ex-Epic icon also met with screenwriter Gary Whitta, visited visual effects studio Zoic Studios, dropped by DC Comics, and even popped into Legendary Entertainment, the production company behind the likes of *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Inception* and that, intriguingly, is still in the running to work on the *Gears Of War* movie, long mired in development hell.

It seems like anything is possible. Bleszinski himself is very much welcoming the potential for change with open arms, exploring every option that's available – and even some that probably aren't. Recently he retweeted a link from 13 June, in which he wrote "Shiggy, call me" in response to Miyamoto's desire to make a first-person shooter. More inflammatory than that was Bleszinski's tweet sent while on the ground in Pittsburgh, stating: "Hey, Capcom. Call me. We can fix *Resident Evil*. Together. :-)" While this sent shivers down the spine for some – particularly those who claim it was Bleszinski's influence that caused the series to 'break' in the first place – there is a new generation of action-horror gore hounds who would no doubt love to see 'Dude Huge' inject some of his testosterone-fuelled gameplay into a series that's otherwise showing signs of obsolescence.

We can only hypothesise what's next based on Bleszinski's tweets, and have no way to accurately predict where he's going next, particularly when he's spreading himself so thin over the landscape of North America – also Paris, where he tweeted his desire to meet with David Cage. What we do know for sure is that Bleszinski is a clever, committed and motivated developer with good ideas, and wherever he directs that energy is sure to result in something positive to gamers across the globe. Expect exciting announcements to be just around the corner.


RESIDENT EVIL 4 MAESTRO SHINJI MIKAMI NETS RE REMAKE LEAD ARTIST TO WORK ON PROJECT ZWEI




(KUNG FU KILLIAN)

Fighting for Sony

Seth Killian might have been known for his work bringing the community together at Capcom, but now at Sony Santa Monica he's helping Sony make a name for itself once again

For a lot of players, you are synonymous with Capcom's fighting game community. What motivated you to join Sony Santa Monica?
I was excited about Santa Monica's range of games. So for me, they're without question one of the best studios in the United States. You've got games like *God Of War* on one side and games like *Journey* on the other, all coming through the same studio.

It is exciting, not just because I really like those games, but also because it's a great challenge for me personally. I felt like I was at a good place at Capcom. Sometimes that's a good thing and sometimes you want to put yourself in a position to fail. I'm learning a lot of great new things, got all sorts of new challenges just like I had when I joined Capcom, so I'm very happy with that.

Given the timing of when you joined, how much input have you had with *PlayStation All-Stars* in particular?
So obviously when I got there, the team at SuperBot had already built an incredible game. What we were doing at the end was polish and focus, not just on the characters but the whole package. [We were] trying to make everything else in the game match up to the core combat, which I think is really addictive and sticky. Balance, to me, is where I want to spend the rest of my focus. Obviously that goes not just right up to launch, but beyond.

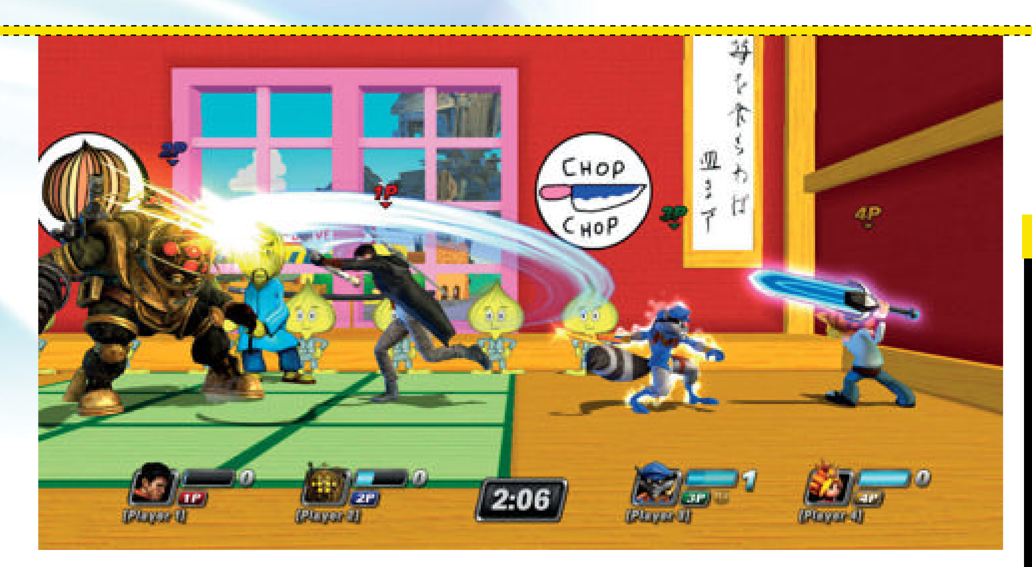
Are you guys looking at this as a serious, competitive, high-level game?
We absolutely are and I don't want to be the guy doing the hard sell on that, but it's just the people who made the game; that's 90 per cent of what they play.

Part of our issue is we keep showing free-for-all matches in all of our assets and things that go out. When you see free-for-all, you see four characters ping-ponging off each other and there doesn't seem to be any particular strategy. It's got an element of variance that is not as welcome in the core fighting game scene, but that goes away immediately when you start doing 2v2 or 1v1 matches, where there is no variance whatsoever.

With Sony and *PlayStation All-Stars*, you have the opportunity to forge a new type of fighting experience. What do you see in the future for fighting games?
Part of the way to keep things fresh is to open the door to new players. For a game like *Street Fighter*, that's very difficult, because there's a legacy of 20-plus years for mechanics. The motion for Hadoken is something close to sacred, right? You can't do that without alienating people who have been part of the scene for 20 years. Whereas

Above Killian's expertise in the fighting genre proved invaluable in balancing *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* for high-level play.

TIMESPLITTERS 4 MIGHT WELL BE DEAD BUT CRYTEK HAVE SANCTIONED A TIMESPLITTERS CRYENGINE MOD



Above It's a world away from the technical brilliance of *Street Fighter*, but *PlayStation All-Stars* has been set up with one eye on the fighting hardcore.

if you're trying to introduce new players and they say, 'How do I do the big fireball?' And you say, 'Quarter-circle forward, then quarter-circle forward again quickly, then press all three punches.' And they say, 'What? Why would I do that?' and they're sort of alienated by it. Some are attracted by the complexity, but for every one you attract, you turn away ten. They go and play *Call Of Duty*, hit the trigger and kill somebody. I think the way to really expand fighting games is to make them relevant to new audiences.

So you don't need to reinvent the wheel just to attract a new player?

Fighting games, to me, are still one of the great genres ever invented, so I don't want to see them collapse under their own weight again.

Throwing a simple Hadoken is just as interesting with a one-button command as it is with the motion. It's about when to do the move; it's about outguessing your opponent and those things are all present, even in games with relatively simple controls. They're all certainly present in *All-Stars*.

So I hope that's a way of drawing in a lot of new people, and it's also a game that requires a little less investment, at least to get going, than some of the other traditional fighting games.

I feel like *All-Stars*, especially in free-for-all, is fun right away. Even if you aren't great at it, you get moments of victory you don't necessarily get in other fighting games. In this game, it's not just fresh, but it's also approachable while having a lot of the same core concepts.

You spent a lot of time at Capcom bridging the gap between development and community. Can gamers expect the same level of commitment with *All-Stars*?

Well, I can't say we're going to address everyone's concerns or desires. There are obviously a lot of requests for characters we don't own, but some of the people who have been vocal on forums asking for specific characters, they're going to get their way… if things work out.

> "The motion for Hadoken is something close to sacred, right?"
>
> Seth Killian, Sony Santa Monica



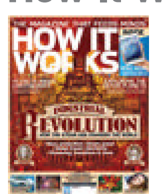
FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



With the Wii U now out in the wild, **NowGamer.com** is the best place for all the latest news and reviews following Nintendo's exciting new console launch. Alongside the usual host of previews and interviews, you can find festive guides to the holiday season of gaming, the latest cheats, and the highest-quality gaming critique on the web.

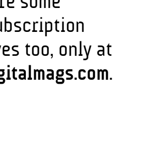
How It Works



Issue 41 of **How It Works**, the magazine that feeds minds, delves into the Industrial Revolution, exploring the inventions and the people that have changed the way we live today. Plus, it will take you on a journey into the outer Solar System, answer your top tectonic questions in 25 Facts About Earthquakes, crack open an iPad mini, and delve into the world of amphibious vehicles.

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GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S 'INSANE' MIGHT BE RESURRECTED AS HE HAS NOW LANDED A NEW DEVELOPER



#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Triple-A disappointment



My favourite game of 2012 is *The Walking Dead*. My favourite meta-game of 2012 has been discovering ways of discussing *The Walking Dead* on social media without ruining it for others.

If you've played it, you'll know what I mean when I say the caravan moment will stick with me for a long, long time. If you haven't played it, do, before someone spoils it.

You could argue that *The Walking Dead* was light on gameplay and challenge, but that would overlook what a huge step forward it was in terms of character, story and delivery. These are characters you care about, and you'll make decisions that make you panic. There is a lot to be written about the game, but until more people have had the chance to play it through, it's not worth spoiling. Not just yet.

There were only two other rivals in the past 12 months that came close. *Journey* is the only game I've played that made me giggle. It's also the only time I've ever felt any affinity for a random stranger on PSN, as we struggled up that final, snowy mountain together. The end credits then showed his PSN ID was BigBooger69, ruining the moment somewhat, but anyway. The other rival was *Zen Pinball 2*, which has effectively turned my Vita into a portable £200 *Zen Pinball 2* console. And I'm happy with that. Perhaps just as well, given Sony's odd lack of support for its handheld thus far.

But my biggest surprise is how few of the triple-A titles in 2012 resonated with me in ways that I expected. I'm a fan of bombast, of explosions, of simple thrills and set pieces. I happily count *Gears Of War*, *Mass Effect*, *Red Dead Redemption* and *Uncharted 2* as my favourite games this generation. I'm fairly sure I'm part of the demographic publishers aim for when they keep adding zeroes to the end of their budgets and go for bigger, better, ballsier. Yet besides *Dishonored*, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* and *Far Cry 3*, nothing clicked.

And it's got me worried. Not for my own gaming tastes but for the direction the industry is heading. It's the two most recent examples of disappointing triple-A titles that highlight my concerns: *Resident Evil 6* and *Assassin's Creed III*. *Resident Evil 6* had more than 600 people working on it while *Assassin's Creed III* was put together by four different Ubisoft studios.

> We struggled up that final, snowy mountain together. The end credits then showed his PSN ID was BigBooger69, ruining the moment somewhat

It shows. *Resident Evil 6* was simply too big for its own good. While the core gameplay was solid – the action is a lot tighter than Capcom is given credit for – there are too many dud sequences, from the opening of Chris's campaign to any driving section. There's no real focus to *Resident Evil 6*'s vision. It's a melting pot of different ideas and misguided ambition, the end result being an uneven patchwork of ideas that sometimes came together, sometimes fell apart.

It's the same with *Assassin's Creed III*. For every new idea that worked, such as naval battles, there were plenty more that didn't, like the stealth, crafting and horse-riding. Ubisoft's adventure was also plagued with rampant glitches throughout. Even with three years of development time, it felt rushed when it finally hit the shelves, and this was having been scaled back, as canoeing and scalping were both stripped from the final version.

Both games are too big and, in isolation, that in itself wouldn't be an issue. But it's the mentality that's alarming and shows these problems will likely become more frequent. Both Capcom and Ubisoft were bragging about the armies they had working on the games, as though the solution to creating bigger and better games to outdo the competition is simply to put more hands on deck. There's a saying about cooks and broth that would be apt here, and it was inevitable that both games would have a bitty, piecemeal feel to them, given how they were made.

The concern with the Xbox 720 and PS4 looming on the horizon is that a lot of publishers will be priced out of the equation as development costs spiral. I think we've seen enough evidence to know this isn't as black and white as it may have been a few years ago. Xbox Live Arcade, PSN, Steam and Kickstarter show there are alternative models to creating blockbuster retail titles, and they're growing in importance. It's also good that a lot of the growing pains are being dealt with now rather than when the next generation of consoles does arrive.

But the biggest challenge will be for those who can afford to hang with the arms race. If games like *Resident Evil 6* and *Assassin's Creed III* are showing the effects of a lack of focus and fractured development, what hope is there for next-gen blockbusters? Teams will need to grow in size to deal with the bigger demands of next-gen development. If we're seeing series such as *Resident Evil* and *Assassin's Creed* suffer, what hope do the rest have?

I'm hoping for next year that I will get my bombast and explosions served up in focused and honed triple-A titles – or quadruple-A titles, or whatever the new ridiculous marketing term would be. As refreshing as it is to see smaller titles become more prevalent and prominent to the point where games of the year can be a discussion over fresh IP from smaller studios, it would be a shame to lose the traditional big hitters as they struggle to keep up with the escalating scale of games development.

Ryan King is editor of NOWGamer.com

Destiny: What's next for Bungie?

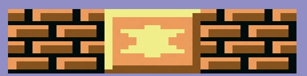
→ Bungie's hand is forced by another leak, as the first information on Destiny is revealed

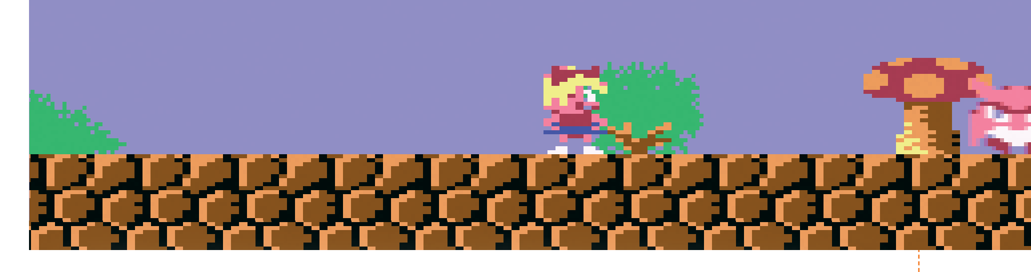
Bungie's "sci-fantasy action shooter", *Destiny*, has been revealed to the world thanks to yet another leak. Details are thin, but information suggests it will be set 700 years from now in the last city on Earth, as alien invaders attack from all corners of the universe. The city is protected by a mysterious orb-shaped ship, defending it as "young knights" fly into the stars to combat the growing threat of extinction. Casting you as one of these warriors, *Destiny* is being described as a "fun and accessible" shooter, with the developer keen to create a universe "as deep, tangible and relatable as that of the *Star Wars* franchise".

Interestingly, the documents also suggest it is "designed to be highly social", once more adding weight to the rumour that *Destiny* started life as an MMO. Either way, Bungie has promised more information soon, and we can't wait to see what's on the horizon for the creator of *Halo*.



BIT BY BIT
with Howard Scott Warshaw





Money is better spent on innovation than lawyers. Just ask Atari…



"Talent borrows, genius steals." Oscar Wilde coined this phase before the concept of videogames ever existed, yet he pretty much captured the spirit of the industry in these four words. Look at the ratio of original productions to knock-offs. It's abysmally low. That's not an indictment of developers. It's hard to make viable creative innovations. And we all must service the gaping, hungry maw of revenue targets if we are to continue producing anything at all.

Given the cost of development and the desire to keep eating and paying rent, companies naturally mitigate risk by opting to knock off popular game concepts far more frequently than launching new ones. We all understand this dynamic. It's not a surprise; it's just a shame.

What is a surprise is the shock and ire developers experience when they see industry colleagues doing this. Some businesses would call this unethical at best and industrial espionage at worst. But in the videogame industry this is just business as usual. We all steal from each other. Making truly new games is simply hard to do, so we try to exercise our genius by stealing brilliantly and then trying to defend against the ensuing legal barrage. But it goes from ridiculous to absurd when I start to yell "Thief!" because someone steals an idea I stole in the first place. This, too, is business as usual.

And a good job it is! This sort of theft must not go unpunished. In our litigious industry, someone is always trying to recover damages, and this is a crucial part of the process. If I can't recover theses monies, how can I possibly satisfy the judgments against me for my own thievery? It would be chaos!

I see in the news how Apple is in the courts again. This time with Samsung, Amazon and Google. They are all fighting over esoteric rights and protections in the treacherous and rapidly evolving landscape of mobile interactive entertainment and all that entails. In a world where we're still waiting for the killer app, the big hitters are burning major euros in court proceedings. Money that could be spent in their labs, trying to make the next big thing. And can you blame them? It's just tiger stripes…

> Making truly new games is simply hard to do, so we try to exercise our genius by stealing brilliantly and then trying to defend against the legal barrage

Apple has a long and storied tradition in this department. Go back to the olden days, before wireless connectivity, when the big battle was over the PC market. Apple went after Microsoft for knocking off the graphical user desktop interface, ideas Apple got from Xerox PARC in the first place.

Again, Apple came by that honestly since many of its early employees came from Atari. You see, Atari practically invented the if-you-can't-beat-them-sue-them strategy. In the late Seventies and very early Eighties, Atari was dealing with a big problem: competition. The formation of Activision and later Imagic tested it. Atari sued them. Atari spent more time in court than on its own innovation. Atari did everything it could to hammer people into legal submission rather than attempt to outproduce them, and in the end it cost it dearly.

What was really interesting was Atari wound up trying to stop Activision and Imagic legally because it refused to entertain the bonus requests of the engineers who left to form these companies. Atari could have spent a very small portion of its legal fees on bonuses for those engineers, eliminating the problem before it began. But it didn't.

In a similar vein, news reports state that Steve Jobs was offered the chance to be CEO of Google early on, but he turned that down, possibly thinking it wasn't worth his time messing with these young upstarts. But the lesson of history is clear: if you don't nip these things in the bud, sometimes they grow and sprawl until they're blocking the sunlight to your garden. Then you have to sue them in order to accomplish what they invited you to do in the first place. It's a bit silly really. Can't we all just get along?

Ours is a big pie, but it's feeding a lot of lawyers these days. For some reason it proves difficult for some people to consider growing together for our mutual benefit rather than taking it all for myself and cutting others out. And for some other reason, the people who suffer from this affliction cannot stop complaining about their comeuppance, which is not altogether unbefitting their original intentions.

In summary, I believe we are afforded the opportunity to sample a great deal of whining in this industry, but isn't that a natural by-product of sour grapes?

■ Before they were 'first-person shooters', they were '*Doom* clones'. Imitation doesn't have to be a bad thing.



Howard Scott Warshaw is a videogames development veteran. He allegedly killed the games industry with *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*. We're sure he's sorry.

Nintendo Wii U is released in the UK

→ On 30 November, Nintendo finally released its long-awaited successor to the groundbreaking Wii, offering players a new perspective on console gaming. After a divisive critical reception on launch and lukewarm international sales, we asked the games™ readership exactly what they think of the first console of a new generation

"It's great! Miiverse is much better than any of the social options on PS/360 and the controller makes such a difference!"
@TheZjman, Twitter

"For me it's the best couch handheld ever, which is where I play my games. I don't like to hog the TV. A home console I can play! "
@axisfrod, Twitter

"I wouldn't know, mine is still downloading that stupid day 1 update."
@DrTarsus, Twitter

"Everyone whines about graphics capabilities and processing power. It's not what you have, but what you do with it"
@JimmyGee, Twitter

"It really does offer something new. Off television play is worth it alone. Miiverse is also wonderful. It's such a happy place!"
@chuppachup, Twitter

"Really impressed so far, but the unity between console and GamePad can be somewhat of a chore at times (net being able to turn off either separately for instance). I do like the feel of the Pad though and Miiverse, albeit very slow, is a nice Nintendo-ish take on Xbox Live. I don't like the half-arsed Pro Controller on the other hand, as it doesn't even work with any of my games in single-player (*Mario, Trine, Nano Assault*)."
Joël Hartmann, Facebook

"I love the GamePad. It's one of the coolest inventions since… dunno, maybe the analogue stick. Which, by the way, the GamePad features the best pair of I've yet to feel under my thumbs."
Maryokutai, games™ forum

"I'm tired of the moaning about lack of power. It's not about that. The controller is exciting and it's changing how I play games."
@ben_cameron, Twitter

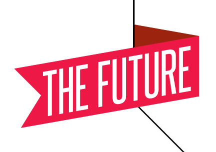
"It's surpassed expectations I had for it, the GamePad really adds to the game."
@socialanimeguy, Twitter





18
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THE
FUTURE
IS
HERE
THE GAMES
THE HARDWARE
& THE PEOPLE
WHAT WILL THE NEXT GEN LOOK LIKE?
ARE MOTION CONTROLS HERE TO STAY?
IS CROWDSOURCING THE FUTURE OF DEVELOPMENT?
WILL VIRTUAL REALITY BE THE NEXT BIG THING?
ARE CONSOLES A THING OF THE PAST?
CAN CLOUD GAMING CHANGE THE INDUSTRY?



AS WE ENTER A NEW YEAR, THE FUTURE OF GAMING HAS NEVER FELT CLOSER. NEW CONSOLES, NEW NAMES AND A HUGE AMOUNT OF QUALITY TITLES ARE JUST AROUND THE CORNER. TO GET US STARTED WE SPEAK TO THOSE INVOLVED IN EVERY ASPECT OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY TO FIND OUT JUST WHAT THE FUTURE WILL HOLD FOR GAMING

Gaming is doomed, destined to become a creatively bereft wasteland where nothing but the latest multibillion-dollar murder simulator force fed to our children succeeds, or the most superficial of cash-gouging 'free' to play mobile games manages to get any attention.

Well, that or we're actually in a golden era – huge, open, easy access to massive audiences through professional, relatively fair storefronts; development tools available to all; a new wave of creative freedoms even for those making triple-A blockbusters.

It all depends on who you ask. **games™** went out there to find out, with a new year ahead, what we can expect from gaming in the future. What are those in the industry looking forward to? What are they scared of? And will *Half-Life 3* ever come out?

It's of little surprise that motion control comes up with many of the folks we chat to, and the view was pretty unanimous: it's here to stay. "I think motion control will find its home in the right places," Stu Tilley of Sony tells us. "When you get new technology, everyone experiments until you've got some winners, and other games will build on the top of that. I wouldn't say it will go more niche, but there will be games that specifically work very well with it, so if your game design is bettered by motion control, then it will be a big thing. If your game design doesn't feel better, if it feels a bit bolted on, then it's not going to be successful. I think we will find over time that the games developed as the technology improves will be more – all – about the game's content. I don't see motion control going away in any shape or form. There will still be sticks and buttons, but it's about choice."

Andrew Oliver of Blitz Games Studios is even more enthusiastic about the future of waggling: "Everyone seems to be in this slight malaise. I talked about something called the Gartner Hype Curve – any new technology nowadays, when they first invent it, when it's first talked about at CES and so on, there's this massive hype that builds up before it comes to consumers. But when it's launched there's a massive drop-off [in enthusiasm]. It happens with everything, whether it be 3D TVs, or smart TVs, or 3D printers – everyone goes, 'Oh my god, that's really exciting!' then when it comes out it sort of goes a bit flat. But then, after a while, people start to go, 'Oh, actually this is quite cool,' and this new market starts to emerge. This is exactly what we're seeing with motion control."

But do other developers share the enthusiasm? "It's going to be hard to beat the standard controller for a game where you're going to be playing it for a very long time," Jeff O'Connell of United Front Games tells us, "but it would be interesting at some point during a game like this to have more physical interactivity. Maybe down the road some more integration of things like Kinect or Move. We'll have to see what comes down the pipe, but that would make something interesting, at least for segments of future triple-A games."

And Henrique Olifiers, co-founder of Bossa Studios, appears to be a big fan of diversification, if only to open things up to more gamers: "If you look at a controller like the DualShock or the Xbox 360 controller, anyone who has not grown up using these gamepads is completely unable to use them. The complexity level of the games being produced by these platforms up to three or four years ago is astonishingly high."

It wasn't pure praise for motion control, of course, with Thomas Grip of Frictional Games giving pragmatic reasons as to why it's not the control method he would choose: "The [Wii Remote] seemed very interesting at first, but after having been on the market for a while it has turned out incredibly hard to do much with it apart from movements that do not require precision. The same kind of thing is seen with Kinect; it is very hard to do something that works well, and in the end it is not much different from something like the PlayStation Eye. Another recent controller was the Novint Falcon, which used haptic output and allowed tons more precision in 3D motion than a [Wii Remote] – we actually worked with this for our *Penumbra* games

■ The Wii Remote was undoubtedly a revolutionary controller, but have gamers and developers alike fallen out of love with motion controls?



– and it turns out the verdict is pretty much the same: it is very hard to do anything very different with this hardware.

"It seems to be the reason is the same across the board: they are trying to convert analogue natural motion into a digital form, which is a really hard problem – one I think might not even be possible to solve for stuff like games."

NCsoft's Sarah Rogers also isn't huge on the flailing control scheme: "I'm really excited about developments in the way we can interact with games, beyond motion control. I think this, combined with the rapidly increasing power of hardware, will give us some incredibly immersive game experiences in the coming years."

But that technological progress isn't something that drives innovation or creativity in and of itself, and some of those speaking to **games™** were keen to point out that bigger doesn't necessarily equate to better. "The jump from SNES to PlayStation was massive – 'Wow, you can do things in 3D!' – then the jump from PSone to PS2 was massive; it was just incomparable what you could do with [the new console]," Sony's Pete Smith says. "But as technology gets better and better, all of a sudden it's not just about saying, 'I'm going to do something that looks a lot more pretty than before.' That's fantastic, because it's all about content. The more reliant people are on content, the less reliant they are on technology – spending all of their budget on particles and the detail in the face doesn't affect the game. It doesn't affect that game's experience. Once you've reached a certain level you've got it, and you can forget about it – and focus on just making great games.



■ Tech demos of new middleware like Unreal Engine 4 suggest emphasis on effects and particles rather than raw polygons next generation.

You're not looking at games because of [technology]; you're looking at them because they're fantastic experiences because of their fantastic content. It's a nice place to be and hopefully that will continue."

Surely there's a downside? Yes, says Smith: "If people focused on the opposite of what I said – if they decided to focus on the technology, on modelling eyelashes, if it becomes an arms race of who can do the most detailed nostril, then we're not in a very good place. Fortunately, I don't think that will happen. I think people will say, 'The nostril is fine. Leave it alone. Let's focus on the game.'"

This is an attitude we found prevalent among certain developers, especially those with an artistic background, like Brant Nicholas of Activision. "I am not really waiting for that extra blade of grass to make the world more visually stunning," he says. "For the next gen, I'm personally looking forward to the increased processing power and what this will allow people to achieve with in-game AI-driven decision-making. My hope is that we will finally be able to integrate truly learning AI that will provide not only adaptive encounters for the player, but also a well-balanced experience that is fun to play for gamers of any skill level. Unfortunately, AI-driven 'non-deterministic' gameplay is notoriously difficult to script and still tell a compelling story. In the end, it will be an awesome experience to see how things unfold in the next few years."



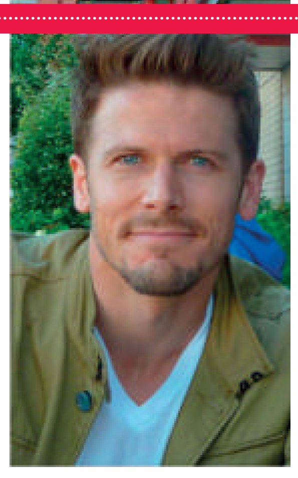
"IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME – A HISTORICAL INEVITABILITY – THAT ALL GAMES WILL BE SERVED DIGITALLY"
IAN LIVINGSTONE



"THE MORE RELIANT PEOPLE ARE ON CONTENT, THE LESS RELIANT THEY ARE ON TECHNOLOGY. SPENDING THEIR BUDGET ON PARTICLES AND [FACIAL DETAIL] DOESN'T AFFECT THE GAME"
PETE SMITH

A different viewpoint is shared by Viktor Antonov of Arkane Studios. "I've had the philosophy of trying to remove everything that doesn't relate to the story," he explains. "Painters have been doing that for 400 years and have gotten really good at it. So, this is really about more abstract and stylised games – that's the future. I think games, like any media, will try and become photorealistic first, but when that's done what's next? Anybody can do photorealism and scan things into a game, but that's not the point."

Grip is in agreement: "I think we have reached a sort of barrier now where it is really hard to move forward. Interestingly, software and hardware have the same problem: whenever we push for something that is more 'real', expectations go up, and problems pop up in other areas. However, Moore's law still applies; we are still getting better and better computers, so what to do with this power? My suggestion is to just make sure to do what we do now, but a lot simpler. If you look at SNES-like 2D games now, these can be made much more easily than 20 years ago simply because we have so much more processing power available. Where you had to work really hard to get some effect in two decades ago, now you can do it without any effort. I think you want to see the same for 3D games. This puts focus on design instead of just solving everything through tech. We have had years of constant and great tech advancement; let's see all that focus be put on the design innovation instead!"



BEDTIME STORIES

■ **IT'S NOT just the tech and the business models that will evolve over the next decade. We're going to see huge improvements in videogame storytelling, facilitated by these advances in tech and so on. "Console games have become more immersive, certainly with triple-A titles," says O'Connell, "and I think the ability to tell stories that are better through greater processing power and greater graphical capability, I'm sure that is going to be an aspect of what these consoles bring. As a fan of triple-A experiences myself and a developer of those, I think we're all looking forward at United Front to that."**

Rogers is equally positive about tech changes, though she shows particular enthusiasm for a hardware side of things: "Generally speaking, new technology is enabling gamers to interact with game experiences in much more advanced ways. It looks like virtual reality headsets could be making a comeback pretty soon, with cheaper and more responsive kit available."

And with the mention of virtual reality, what better time to get Palmer Luckey of Oculus Rift involved? "Software-wise, I think we are going to see current trends continue to grow," he suggests. "Better graphics, higher frame rates and potentially awesome models like free-to-play and cloud gaming. Hardware changes are going to be a lot more interesting, I think; 3D TVs, a new round of consoles, PC gaming coming back into vogue, dedicated gaming handhelds being supplanted by smartphones, and obviously, the potential for widespread virtual reality!"

As much as it may feel a smidge like self-promotion, Luckey goes on: "What I look forward to the most, though, is virtual reality gaming. We have been trying for years to simulate reality in games, and the technology we need to feel as if we are inside the game is tantalisingly close. Brain links would be better in some hypothetical sense, sure, but we don't need that kind of revolutionary advancement to get immersion. It can be done with current technology at a cost anyone can afford, and that is definitely a future I look forward to."

Another huge element in the great crystal ball of gaming predictions is the ever-growing mobile and social gaming scene. It's not the most outlandish prediction to suggest that it will get bigger, but there are still some interesting viewpoints on offer from our speakers.

Back to NCsoft's Rogers: "I believe mobile and social gaming will become ubiquitous, with most if not all games having a reasonable degree of online functionality. The mobile devices these games are played on will continue to rapidly increase in power, potentially replacing home consoles and PCs as the primary gaming platform."

And it's unsurprising to find Guy De Beer of Playcast Media Systems in support of the casual market. "This growing 'casual' audience, coupled with the convergence of technology platforms, is already driving the evolution of a new medium that merges together the experience of television and the engagement and interactivity of videogames," he posits. "On the distribution side, the massive growth of interactive smart devices is projected to continue at an exponential rate, and would 'gamify' growing aspects of people's daily routine. Electronic interactive entertainment will become omnipresent to people of all ages."

The reigning prince of all things cloud gaming, Gaikai's Dave Perry, was equally full of praise for the impact social gaming has had. "It opened up the market a lot – it started to redefine just what is the platform," he says. "That's one of the inspirations I've been following: the idea that if you get a hit on the iPhone you want to get it on Android immediately, but then you also want it on Facebook and you also want it on console.

"The world is trapped within all these different ecosystems and all we do is keep adding more ecosystems, which is actually making it harder. It's all made me step back and say I think software has to fundamentally change – software has to ask questions before it runs. Currently you have to design and cripple your game down to the device, but I think in the future you'll be designing the game so that it'll be badass and amazing, but it will still fit down onto all of those devices. So the game has to auto-configure to the device and use the input methods on the device, but it can graphically look breathtaking because it's not using the chips in that device itself."

This increasing prevalence of gaming in everyday life is something that hasn't passed Smith by, either: "We've got generations now that have been brought up gaming where it's second nature, and that's going to help the games industry. It's now a credible career – there are university courses in game design, game production, and that's just going to mean more and more talent coming into the industry for a much wider market. And the bigger the market grows, the better the talent coming in. This means more variety, which means more innovation."

It might surprise some, though, that living legend Ian Livingstone is such a firm

PC'S NOT DEAD

THE LACK of new home consoles from Sony and Microsoft gave the PC time to re-establish itself as the gaming platform of the truly committed. Luckey backs up that sentiment: "I am a PC gamer first and foremost, so it is great to see PC games getting more attention these days. This is the first year in a long while with no 'PC gaming is dead' articles, and there are a lot of great PC exclusives on the market or coming soon – *Diablo III*, *Tribes: Ascend*, *PlanetSide 2*, *Hawken*, etc."



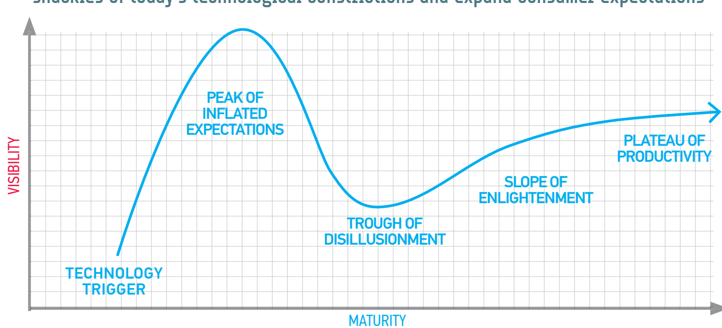
"AFTER A WHILE, PEOPLE START TO GO, 'OH, ACTUALLY THIS IS QUITE COOL,' AND THIS NEW MARKET STARTS TO EMERGE. THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT WE'RE SEEING WITH MOTION CONTROLS"
ANDREW OLIVER



"FOR THE NEXT GEN, I'M PERSONALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO THE INCREASED PROCESSING POWER AND WHAT THIS WILL ALLOW PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE WITH IN-GAME DECISION-MAKING"
BRANT NICHOLAS

INNOVATION CHART

Invention is the means by which developers continue to break through the shackles of today's technological constrictions and expand consumer expectations







TOO LONG; DIDN'T READ

WE KNOW sometimes you just don't want to read a whole, text-heavy feature. If that's the case here, then let Team Ninja's Yosuke Hayashi sum up one of the most popular viewpoints: "I think [wanting more] power is the obvious answer. But it's more than just that – it's not all about having great-looking games, great graphics. You need more; you need features that can enhance videogames and gaming experiences. We want something that will blow people away, something that lets us create games that offer players experiences that they can't get from what developers are producing right now."

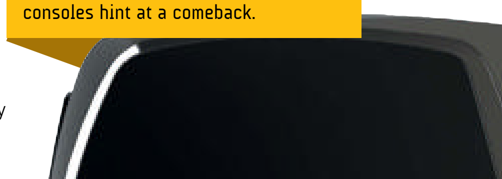
believer in a digital-only future: "Clearly Sony sees consoles – in terms of hardware – as having a limited life [with the purchase of Gaikai], and it's only a matter of time – a historical inevitability – that all games will be served digitally."

Size Five Games' Dan Marshall sees things similarly. "I'm looking forward to everything going digital so I don't have to have discs cluttering up everywhere," he says, "and I'm looking forward to it all being integrated directly into our televisions so that even non-gamers occasionally have a go and understand what all the fuss is about."

And even less surprisingly, De Beer feels the same way: "We believe that cloud gaming technology will shift the focus of innovation away from the media playout device, much like video streaming eliminated the VHS/DVD/Blu-ray evolution. In some markets, today's video distribution platforms will play a role in this evolving gaming space, while in other markets, it will be new 'over-the-top' platforms that would capture this business. Some of the trends that would drive this space are new miniature HDMI dongles that will turn every TV set into a giant tablet, and LTE networks that would bring high-quality broadband to every device with no wires."

But it's the dynamism and power of the games industry that excites people like DJ Powers of Valve. "I think this industry is defining the rules for how all kinds of business models are going to be created," he suggests. "You look at what Apple's doing with the App Store, what [Valve] is doing, what Microsoft is working on – the rules of engagement are totally being defined; what revenue splits need to be, how partners work together and all those things. We're at the front edge of that and it's really fun for us."

There are worries over the greater power



■ We thought virtual reality had been and gone, but the buzz behind the Oculus Rift and rumours surrounding next-gen consoles hint at a comeback.





"ANYBODY CAN DO PHOTOREALISM AND SCAN THINGS INTO A GAME, BUT THAT'S NOT THE POINT"
VIKTOR ANTONOV



"GENERALLY SPEAKING, NEW TECHNOLOGY IS ENABLING GAMERS TO INTERACT WITH GAME EXPERIENCES IN MUCH MORE ADVANCED WAYS"
SARAH ROGERS



"I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO EVERYTHING GOING DIGITAL SO I DON'T HAVE TO HAVE DISCS CLUTTERING UP EVERYWHERE"
DAN MARSHALL

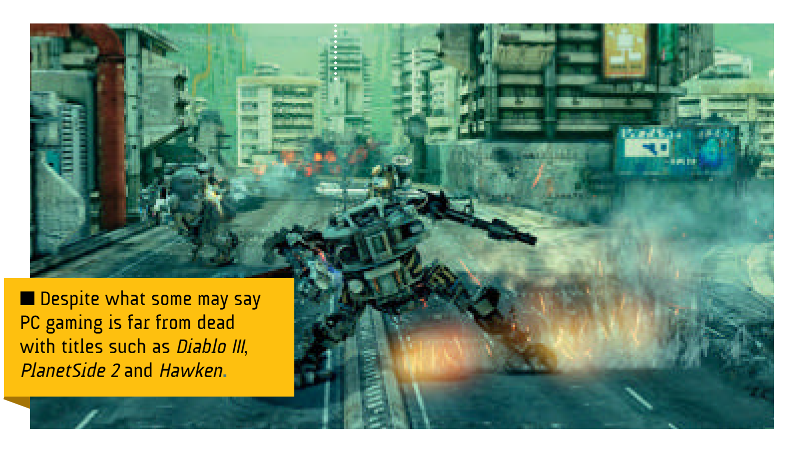
developers have at their hands, though, as Rogers points out: "The increasing power of the hardware will free designers to create whatever they can envisage. This increased complexity in games won't come without downsides, though; the cost of developing triple-A titles will continue to rise, which in turn will have broader-reaching impacts on our industry as a whole. The rising cost of triple-A game development, coupled with the increasing competition in the marketplace, could further polarise the industry, as the industry big hitters assume more control."

Marshall is thinking similarly when we speak to him. "I think my main worry is that triple-A games [will] stagnate because they're bought year in, year out," he warns. "I'm a bit worried that the market will be led by the masses rather than what's critically acclaimed. So *Call Of Duty 8* will still be the exact same game, and no one will be making these blockbuster experiences for people like me who want something new and funky and fresh with their over-the-top entertainment."

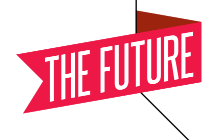
But this drive away from the blockbuster format isn't all bad, as Livingstone tells us: "I think you're going to see less titles in the high-end console range, but you're going to see an enormous amount of new IP on casual game sites, free-to-play games and of course iPhone and Android games. Small, agile teams can get to market very quickly, innovate, iterate, serve new and exciting IP."

"I think we're seeing a breakdown of traditional funding already – from indie developers self-funding their titles, to Kickstarter, alpha funding, commissioned games and the usual publisher-led stuff," says Marshall, also seeing things from the other side. "That shift has only really happened in the last few years, and I think it's set to really explode. I think there will be even more revenue streams for developers, who have seized the means of production and no longer need to rely on publishers."

The ease with which people can self-publish isn't without its pitfalls, though, which



■ Despite what some may say PC gaming is far from dead with titles such as *Diablo III*, *PlanetSide 2* and *Hawken*.



BRICKS AND MORTAR

■ WHILE MANY WE spoke to were clear they see a gaming future on a purely digital level, it came as some surprise that Gaikai's own Dave Perry is very much in support of traditional games shops: "There's nothing that we need to get rid of – we need to keep retail. Sometimes we talk about the comic book industry and how comic book stores have slowly become very niche and very focused on just a small subset of people. If you're in a big shopping mall, the comic book store is the place most people don't go – only the hardcore comic book guys go. But the mass market don't go to the mall and go, 'We're going to go to the comic book store!' We're really worried videogame stores will do the same thing, making it not somewhere that people go; it's in the mall in some little corner that nobody goes to apart from super-hardcore gamers. That's not what we want. We want the opposite: we want to keep growing, so that in every mall in the world there's a major videogame presence. I think as an industry we have to support that and try to help that. It's a front door."

Dave Perry is all too aware of: "The whole world is changing for developers. They have more choices than ever before on where they put their products. But ultimately they need to get the maximum reach possible, so they're going to get behind whoever gets them the most eyeballs. It sounds trivial but it's actually very hard. If you've just made a great game it's actually very hard to get it out in front of countless millions of people in every country in the world."

"I think some very talented guys are going to be upping sticks from their day jobs and setting up on their own," suggests Marshall. "When you've got a talented coder at a company who is working day in, day out with an artist and those guys are like, 'You know what? We really get on and our styles really gel. Let's set up on our own and make our own games.' I think that's going to be good for everyone – they get to make the games they want and are passionate about, and the end gamer gets a much wider choice of the kinds of experience they can have."

One fear we see suggested by a couple of developers is that of the 'walled gardens', where ultimate control over distribution rests with a single company. "The most alarming trend today is the dramatic changes in the ecosystem," warns De Beer, "which are creating massive vertically integrated platforms. Organisations that would control the content creation, distribution and technology could build a handful of 'camps' that would block innovation by closing the system to smaller publishers and content creators. This risk may reverse the growing abundance in creative content that the mobile and social platforms have sparked."

Luckey makes a similar point: "I am worried about the fact that many of the big players are moving towards walled garden app store software distribution, and the only backlash is from a vocal minority of tech nerds. Ordinary people don't know or don't care about the implications, and probably won't until it is too late. I worry about that a lot. The hobbies that taught me the most are things like console modification and emulation, PC building and tweaking. Looking at the past ten years and guessing at the next ten, I am not so sure that the things that I was passionate about will be accessible, or even possible."

■ SmartGlass, the Wii U, and Vita. All three big guns of gaming hardware now have stock in second screen functionality.



"BETTER GRAPHICS, HIGHER FRAME-RATES AND POTENTIALLY AWESOME MODELS LIKE FREE-TO-PLAY AND CLOUD GAMING. HARDWARE CHANGES ARE GOING TO BE A LOT MORE INTERESTING, I THINK"
PALMER LUCKEY



"THE COMPLEXITY LEVEL OF THE GAMES BEING PRODUCED BY THESE PLATFORMS UP TO THREE OR FOUR YEARS AGO IS ASTONISHINGLY HIGH"
HENRIQUE OLIFIERS



"THEY ARE TRYING TO CONVERT ANALOGUE NATURAL MOTION INTO A DIGITAL FORM, WHICH IS A REALLY HARD PROBLEM, WHICH MIGHT NOT EVEN BE POSSIBLE TO SOLVE FOR STUFF LIKE GAMES"
THOMAS GRIP

But as Tilley shows us, even in a future with uncertainty and definite concerns to address, there's always room for excitement. "You know loads of cool stuff is just going to happen – better graphics, programming, use of the cloud, whatever. Even five or six years ago we were excited about how devices would be so connected, and that's now *now*. Where it will be in future is difficult to tell, but you just can't wait for new things to come along and be invented because you know you can take advantage of them. You can design a cool experience around whatever comes about; it's just the thought of what it actually is. Movement tracking is really interesting; maybe just a simple thing like it being able to read your eyes. Who knows? It's a world of stuff that people can put into their games."

So where will gaming take us? Where can it go? Is the aim just to be bigger and better – an eternal rush towards a technological finish line that cannot be reached? Or is there a grand plan for gaming to transcend its bedrooms, its killing, its sexism and idiocy to become something far more worthwhile in the mainstream? Leave it to Livingstone to be the eternal dreamer: "There might even come a point where the whole of an education can be games-based learning, where you enter a contextual hub and rather than reading about, for example, global warming – which can be quite turgid and turn students off – if they could play a game in which they can blow up the world by their actions then it's entertaining, but there's also a lot of deep learning that's going to go on. Then they can put that learning in place themselves and use procedures to reverse that global warming. The fact that you empower people makes that experience so much more meaningful."

And we'd be the first ones to enrol at this school of gaming, no doubt. But what if the future isn't so bright? What if, as Marshall points out, the future is absolutely ruined by one single occurrence?

"My biggest worry, of course, is that *Half-Life 3* will come out and it won't be amazing. Can you imagine? The horror."

But that's only a *possible* future, right? *Right*?



THE NEXT GENERATION

GAMES™ INVESTIGATES THE HARDWARE THAT WILL SHAPE 2013

With the arrival of Nintendo's Wii U, the next generation of console gaming arrives in a flurry of dual-screen innovation and multimedia applications. With Sony and Microsoft's new consoles unconfirmed, unknown and yet tantalising close, what can we really expect from the future of console gaming?

The games industry has changed. The last ten years have seen an explosion in devices able to deliver gaming experiences and now, more than ever before, the big three console manufacturers will be looking at the traditional console model and asking if all the hassle is really worth it. After all, who could have predicted that by the end of the Xbox 360's lifespan it would be competing with a mobile phone for screen time and PC gaming – with the help of indie developers and Kickstarter – would find renewed potential and go on to become the dominant force of innovation in gaming?

The Xbox 360 and PS3 were sold on the strength of their multimedia potential, just as much as gaming clout. What we do with our consoles when we're not playing games has already become a driving factor to many of the current changes and additions, the Xbox 360 alone has seen its app store inundated with TV and movie channels, and looking ahead to its successor, this entertainment hub setup could ultimately push its gaming credentials into the background. "Success in the next generation won't be how many units one can sell – of course that will still be important – but rather how many hours one can keep a consumer in their ecosystem," explains EEDAR industry analyst Jesse Divnich. "Game content is becoming less of a factor, especially as the penetration of tablet and mobile devices not only increase, but the devices themselves become more powerful."

RUMOURS REGARDING THE potential power of the next Xbox began to take shape when a supposed Durango dev kit was auctioned on eBay. With escalating estimations warping any realistic perception of what Microsoft is actually working on, rumours have ranged from ten times the current processing power to 100 and everywhere in between. With Microsoft's patents referring to wearable technology, room-encompassing projections and Kinect 2.0 as central to the new console's experience, the rumours point towards a much more active and involved gaming future. Microsoft might want the next Xbox to realise Kinect's potential in new ways, but it's obvious that audiences aren't as sold on the full-body motion control revolution. When the next Xbox launches, it will have to focus on enticing gamers with new experiences, and ones that can be enjoyed with a pad. As before, the games we can play will form the base of any core audience, but there's greater competition now than ever before. Though Sony's PS3 has caught up

■ Square Enix's Luminous Engine is incredibly impressive, but Square has also licensed Epic's Unreal Engine 4 for some of its future projects.

to the 360 in sales in the last few years, the perception is that this gen has seen the PlayStation brand damaged and relegated to third place. Sony has a lot to prove.

Both next-generation platforms are apparently aiming for powerful GPU and CPU combos, but Sony is rumoured to be developing the PS4 with longevity and graphical grunt as well as affordability in mind. If true, it would, it would certainly seem, to point towards a Sony intent on learning from its past mistakes. Capable of running 1080p visuals at 60fps without breaking a sweat, Sony's new machine has also been linked to new 4K 'ultra HD' resolutions, which appear to be the buzz word replacing '3D'.

THOUGH IT'S EASY to get bogged down in the technical specifications of the potential new consoles and what sorts of experiences they'll lead to, Jesse Divnich's assessment that it will be the 'services' the machines will provide is prophetic in Sony's case. Microsoft may have invested in Skype, but it's Sony's acquisition of Gaikai that seems to hint at a cloud-based future that could be at the heart of the PS4. In that sense, Sony could utilise Gaikai to deliver all manner of entertainment experiences, but what the next gen means for game development, despite the assertion that 'services' will have a greater impact, cannot be overstated.

Games may matter less to the larger audiences looking for entertainment hubs, but they're still the reason the next-gen consoles will find a foothold in living rooms all over the world. Despite the worries that games will come with increased development costs, there are some that believe streamlined toolsets for developers will take much of the bite out of costs. Rockstar's Dan Houser might believe a generation's best games appear at its end, but *GTA V* will look very dated the second a next-gen game is revealed, and there are plenty in the works. Epic, Square Enix, Crytek and Ubisoft have all hinted that next-gen projects are in development. Ubisoft's CEO, Yves Guillemot, explained "there's a good chance" that *Rainbow 6 Patriots* had shifted across to the new consoles and even BioWare's new *Mass Effect* has been hinted at being next gen, taking advantage of DICE's Frostbite 2.0.

> "SUCCESS IN THE NEXT GENERATION WON'T BE HOW MANY UNITS ONE CAN SELL BUT RATHER HOW MANY HOURS ONE CAN KEEP A CONSUMER IN THEIR ECOSYSTEM"

As with any new console, the early games will be a mix of the last gen's design with improved graphics, but it will be how the next-gen Xbox and PlayStation evolve to compete with the increased competition that will be most salient. This could be the last traditional console cycle the industry will see, with cloud gaming, tablets and integrated gaming experiences making it not viable for Sony and Microsoft to compete in the future. If that's true, the next-gen Xbox and PlayStation will need to be very special machines indeed.



■ THOUGH NINTENDO has remained a generation behind the competition in terms of raw technical processing power, its intelligent use of motion control, innovation and cheap entry price ensured this gen's console was a huge hit. Even with software sales declining in the last few years, Nintendo proved that you didn't need a powerhouse of a CPU to make good games. The Wii U finally brings Nintendo's machine in line with the current Xbox and PlayStation, and with it hoping to entice both traditional gamers via its GamePad, providing new gaming experiences, and the Wii Remotes remaining as the family-friendly option, it seems that both bases are covered. Or are they?

Microsoft has shown that it can at least attempt to compete with the Wii U's second screen with SmartGlass, and with both next-gen machines rumoured to produce visuals akin to CGI movies, Nintendo's grace period might not give the Wii U the head start it needs to compete in the long term.



VINCE ZAMPELLA AND JASON WEST

■ THE DUO responsible for *Call Of Duty*'s *Modern Warfare* re-imagining have been tight-lipped since their departure from Infinity Ward in 2010. They went on to form Respawn Entertainment, taking many of the core Infinity Ward staff with them, and we've been waiting patiently for more information ever since. 2013 is going to be a big year for the industry, with new consoles and exciting technology on the horizon, and it will be the team at Respawn we look towards once again to shake up the stale FPS genre for a new generation.



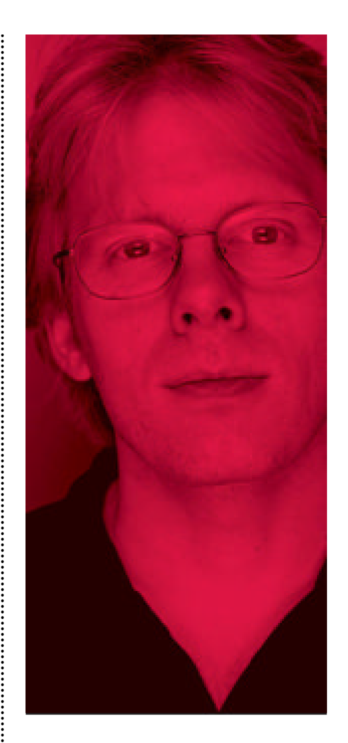
DAVID CAGE

■ CAGE IS always looking to challenge traditional means of storytelling within the medium. With *Heavy Rain*, and *Fahrenheit* before it, Cage and his development studio, Quantic Dream, have forged new ways to play and experience videogames. In 2013, he is looking to once again defy expectation with his PlayStation 3 exclusive *Beyond: Two Souls*. With over 2,000 pages of script, motion capture that took 12 months to shoot and a deep narrative that spans 15 years, it looks like Cage finally has the tools at his disposal to forge the ultimate synthesis of cinematography and gameplay.



GABE NEWELL

■ IT'S VALVE, more so than any of the big three hardware developers, that stands to have the most dramatic impact on the industry over the next 12 months. If the rumours are to be believed, at least. Not satisfied with simply resting on his laurels, Gabe Newell is looking to expand Valve in ways we never imagined possible. A Steam console for your living room that could threaten Apple's digital dominance. 'Project Glass' – the wearable computer taking us to a future imagined only in sci-fi. And if all of those fail to reach fruition, we still have Gordon Freeman's long-awaited return to look forward to.



JOHN CARMACK

■ JOHN CARMACK is a man with seemingly infinite amounts of time on his hands. Not content with getting involved in the space race, trying to slash the costs of commercial exploration, he's also preparing *Doom 4* and supporting new forms of impressive immersive technology. Oculus Rift, the virtual reality headset that looks to put Nintendo's Virtual Boy to shame, is almost upon us, and Carmack has been publicly vaunting the technology at every available opportunity. The mastermind developer has also teased gamers by proposing full integration with *Doom 4*.

8 DEVELOPERS TO

2013 IS GOING TO BE AN EXCITING TIME FOR THE GAMES INDUSTRY. HERE





ATSUSHI INABA

■ 2013 IS going to be huge for Platinum Games, the company co-founded by veteran developer Atsushi Inaba. After ushering in a wave of videogames that highlighted suave style as much as engaging gameplay with *Vanquish* and *Bayonetta*, Platinum has earned itself the licence to one of the biggest franchises in the world and a Nintendo exclusive. *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is going to bring new understanding to destructible environments, while *Bayonetta 2* is likely to be where Inaba gets to flex his creative muscles. If any developer has the capacity to flaunt the Wii U's capabilities, it's Platinum.



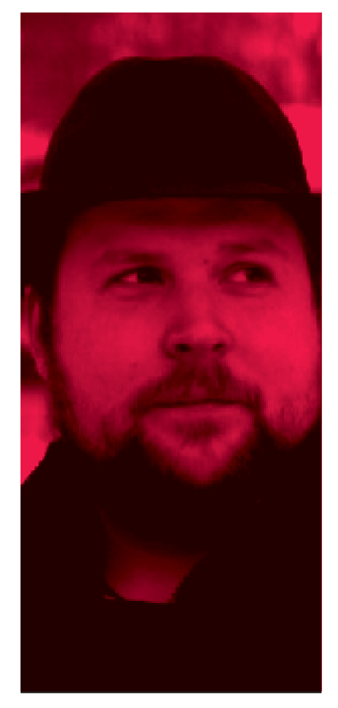
HIDEO KOJIMA

■ FOR 25 years, Hideo Kojima has steered the *Metal Gear* franchise, from designer to director. While it looked as if he was stepping into to a producing capacity for the foreseeable future, he grabbed some headlines with the unveiling of *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*. Back in the director's chair, Kojima stunned us with a new take on the *Metal Gear* mythos. Kojima also revealed the new Fox Engine, which looks unlike anything showcased before. If the new consoles are just around the corner, we have a feeling Kojima will be once again be at the forefront of innovation when the next-generation arrives.



YOSHINORI ONO

■ THE PHRASE 'I'll rest when I'm dead' has never seemed quite so fitting as when it comes to Yoshinori Ono. After a somewhat rocky year, he has stepped back from the *Street Fighter* series he has so lovingly pioneered in recent times and is instead steering Capcom's future. As properties like *Lost Planet 3, Remember Me* and *DmC* are pushed into Western developers' hands, Ono is overseeing the tactic, insuring East meets West in beautiful harmony. Capcom has some huge titles lined up for 2013, and it's likely that we'll see Ono's pioneering Eastern influence evident in each of them.



MARKUS 'NOTCH' PERSSON

■ IN A way, we still think of Notch and his development studio, Mojang, as the little indie developer that could. In reality, it's a force to be reckoned with as *Minecraft* continues to rake in money and accolades in incomprehensible numbers. As he ramps up development on *0x10c*, the sci-fi game where players must explore new worlds against the demands of the ship's programmable 16-bit computer, it looks as if Notch's unique vision is taking Mojang towards another sweeping success. Millions of gamers are watching.

WATCH IN 2013

ARE THE DEVELOPERS WE THINK WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE OF GAMING



GET RICH OR DIE TRYING

GRAND THEFT AUTO V IS ALMOST HERE. AFTER YEARS OF RAMPANT SPECULATION, BLOATED ANALYST PROCLAMATIONS AND ASININE DEBATE, ROCKSTAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME, HAS ALLOWED JOURNALISTS BEHIND THE SCENES TO SEE ITS MOST AMBITIOUS VENTURE YET. FOUR YEARS. THREE PROTAGONISTS. TWO FOUNDERS. ONE METROPOLIS. GAMES™ UNCOVERS THE TRUTH BEHIND ROCKSTAR'S GRAND OPUS

Like the day when Niko Bellic stepped off a boat onto the shores of Liberty City, staring out at the bustling metropolis with wide-eyed intent, the promise of entering a new Rockstar world where a man pursues the elusive American Dream is one of endless opportunity.

While Rockstar's epic renovation of Liberty City in *Grand Theft Auto IV* embraced the minutiae of city life, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s vast expanse indulges the disjointed culture of a disparate conurbation where the glut of excess and the pleas of the desperate are strange bedfellows. From the imposing gated villas of Rockford Hills to the barren backwaters of Blaine County, through the pearly white sands of Vespucci Beach and the dense bustle of Downtown, *Grand Theft Auto*'s latest backdrop is unlike anything we've seen to date. Welcome to Los Santos, the city that changes everything.

This isn't the first time that Rockstar has visited the versatile municipality, after *GTA: San Andreas* dedicated a small fraction of its larger state to the Los Angeles facsimile. The Los Santos of *GTA V* is far removed from the Nineties pastiche of ghetto culture that framed the PlayStation 2 rendition; it is rather a more focused and versatile landscape that accommodates Rockstar's satirical crosshairs, pointed at the current economic downturn.

It's worth pointing out that the divide between the affluent and deprived is stretched across an unimaginable scale that Rockstar claims engulfs the entire world maps of *Red Dead Redemption*, *GTA: San Andreas* and *GTA IV* combined. But a Rockstar game is more than just the breadth of its open world, each echoing the triumphs of its predecessors, while driving innovation beyond expectation.

The rolling hills nestled at the fringes of Los Santos' city centre are packed with indigenous wildlife, with bobcats, bears and



FRANKLIN

'The Rookie' **Age:** Mid 20s

● FRANKLIN is the youngest of the three protagonists in *GTA V*, an ex-gangbanger who aspires to get more out of life than what the streets offer. Hailing from South Los Santos, Franklin works for a luxury car dealership and often is forced to violently repossess vehicles from owners who default on their payments, using his canine companion Chop to distract owners while he takes their car. It's after Franklin works with Michael on a job that the two become close friends, with the latter becoming his mentor and regarding him as the son he never had.

SKILLS: Car jacking, unarmed combat. He's also an animal lover.



GTA V has rejected fetch quests in favour of escalating large-scale set pieces. There will also be fewer intrusive distractions from friends and family throughout the game.

You won't have to wait until the endgame before you can take to the skies, as Trevor's an ex-military pilot.

mountain lions roaming the backwoods for prey, part of a larger ecosystem reminiscent of the unpredictable wilderness of *Red Dead Redemption*'s endless dustland. Here you'll also come face to face with resident rednecks who dwell among the oil derricks, repellent lakes and mountainous terrain, far removed from the glamour and excess of the city.

It's back at the heart of Los Santos where a familiar handful of landmarks and districts lifted from its real-life inspiration are located. Downtown is easily recognisable by the towering skyscrapers of the financial district juxtaposed by its neighbouring legions of homeless that reside beneath the filthy underpasses. It's here where the first cluster of missions within the game will take place, organising heists to rob from the privileged businessmen who swagger through the streets. Further afield, the Hollywood proxy Vinewood announces its significance with its giant lettering plastered across the Los Santos skyline, the home of dreams both fulfilled and broken is the manic epicentre of *GTA V*'s most debauched objectives. Elsewhere, Vespucci Beach represents LA's hottest tourist traps, brimming with leisurely pursuits and 'herbal remedies' hawked from the various surf shacks lining the sun-drenched promenade.

As you've most likely gathered, summarising this disparate, multifaceted backdrop is seemingly impossible. Los Santos, much like the real-life City of Angels, lacks an immediately discernible identity. To even explore the world, Rockstar realised that it would have to shuck its traditional storytelling methods and adopt a new structure.

In the past, *Grand Theft Auto* games employed the myopic viewpoint of a singular character as the sole perspective. But one person cannot be all things to all people. *Grand Theft Auto IV* proved as much, as Niko Bellic's stoic gravitas and reluctance to become embroiled in his felonious surroundings grated with the series' inimitable depravity. It all felt a bit wrong to suffer post-traumatic stress one moment and then fire an RPG at grandma the next. To avoid this moral flip-flop shared by all open-world games, Rockstar has plumped for three protagonists, who can be switched between in and out of missions. It was an idea that the Rockstar co-founders Dan and Sam Houser stumbled upon during the creation of *GTA IV*'s downloadable content. "It was partly just to do something totally new," Dan Houser told *The Guardian* earlier in the year. "Partly, too, it was because at that point we were deep into the work on the two DLC episodes of *GTA IV*, and we thought, 'Well, the bits where all the stories cross over is kind of cool, so why don't we just do that in one game? So okay, let's just do multiple characters'."

If there was a leader to this intrepid trio then it would be Michael, a retired bank robber who lives among the wealthy celebrities and entrepreneurs up in the glamour of Rockford Hills. Michael's perspective is almost the epilogue of every previous *GTA* character before him – the 'what happened next' after the credits roll. The juxtaposition between his role and that of Franklin is clear: the latter is the younger, more traditional *GTA* protagonist; a character stuck at bottom rung who Michael can mentor. And then there's the wild card, Trevor, the balls-to-the-wall, batshit crazy dirtbag who lives life on the fringes of society. The three characters each have their own specific talents and specialities and will

TREVOR
'The Wild Card'

THE PROVERBIAL loose cannon of the group, Trevor is a substance-abusing psychotic with a penchant for violent eruptions and destructive whims. A former colleague of Michael back in the bank-robbing days, Trevor also owns Trevor Phillips Enterprises out in Blaine County, which deals with weapons and drugs. He's also an ex-military pilot, a skill that Michael employs when he comes out of retirement for a series of large-scale heists across Los Santos.

SKILLS: Pilot, explosive expert, fearless



Rockstar has confirmed that *Max Payne 3* crews will carry over into *GTA V*, so we're expecting competitive/co-operative multiplayer based around the single-player heists. Something along the lines of *Kane & Lynch*.

While the Los Santos of *GTA: San Andreas* aimed to distil Nineties gang culture, *GTA V*'s interpretation will be focused on contemporary LA life, the entire cross section and that abundance of diversity across its sprawl.

THE LENGTHS ROCKSTAR HAS GONE TO IN CREATING AN IMMERSIVE LANDSCAPE IS UNPRECEDENTED; THE STUDIO HAS EVEN MODELLED THE SURROUNDING SEA, ENABLING PLAYERS TO GO SCUBA DIVING OFF THE COAST OF LOS SANTOS

often unite to take on jobs together, with the player given the option to either stick with one character or switch back and forth between the three during missions. But what's more interesting are the narrative opportunities that this dissemination of the lead role presents, enabling Rockstar to indulge its more poignant storytelling whims on one hand with Michael, while turning to Trevor as a disconnect between the narrative and the series' inimitable immorality.

But these professional criminals will each have their own interlocking narratives, building up to several large-scale mega-heists that converge the three storylines. Rockstar has looked to *GTA IV*'s 'Three Leaf Clover' mission, which ranks among the series' most tightly charged setpieces, for inspiration, and the developer promises that each of *Grand Theft Auto V*'s heists will be bigger than any setpiece the developer has delivered to date. That added bombast will no doubt come as welcome reassurance to fans left unimpressed by *GTA IV*'s often meandering structure, but it doesn't arrive at the expense of the story, with each of the major action beats buoyed by character interplay that develops the relationship between the three characters.

Many of the gripes that players had with *GTA IV* was the forced social aspect; Roman constantly ringing and texting to meet up with his cousin, and the constant upkeep of your love life felt needlessly intrusive. While the phone returns as a key device for the characters to initiate missions, Rockstar has dropped the incessant nuisance of rotund relatives and tetchy romances. "You have other people you can hang out with, but the main people you choose are the other protagonists," Dan Houser assured *The Guardian*. "If you're playing as Michael and you want to play a game of tennis, you can call up Franklin and ask him. You are



actually getting to see the main bulk of the story and also spend time with these people off-mission – that side of it gives it a vibrancy that's a lot stronger than with Roman or anyone else."

Clearly, then, *GTA V* doesn't owe a huge amount to its predecessor, forgoing the subdued tone, needless dreariness and endless superfluous pit stops to get tanked with your cousin, returning to the sunnier side of seedy that made *Vice City* so highly regarded. Sideshow attractions do still exist in Los Santos, however, both more varied and robust than anything Liberty City had to offer. Yoga, tennis, golf and jet ski rides are just a few activities among the riches of the city, not to mention the wealth of vehicles across air, land and sea that players can use to drink the immaculately crafted world. The lengths Rockstar has gone to in creating an immersive landscape is unprecedented; the studio has even modelled the surrounding sea, enabling players to go scuba diving off the coast of Los Santos.

Move outside the city into the wilderness and the leisurely pursuits swell, with dirt biking, parachuting and mountain climbing a few of the many rural pleasures. The feeling here is more *Red Dead Redemption* than *GTA*, with dynamic scenarios such as seemingly innocuous hitchhikers and broken down cars posing a threat to any unsuspecting explorers.

What's more surprising is that the whole of Los Santos is open to players from the start and there's no wait on accessing activities, as well as planes, helicopters and other means of exploring the city. It should alleviate concerns about large, empty portions of Los Santos' bloated landmass, as emphasis continues to be placed on the expanse rather than its content. Ultimately, for Rockstar, Los Santos was the opportunity to build the ultimate city experience with everything that it entails. "The bottom line was building one city and doing it properly," Houser told Game Informer back in November. "To do a proper version of LA, which area-wise is the largest city in the world, the game has to give you a sense of that sprawl – if not completely replicate it." Indeed, imitating every facet of the city appears to be high on Rockstar's agenda, but there's one district of the city in particular that the studio has paid close attention to.

● Rockstar promises that driving will scratch the itch created by the lack of high-level racing games in the marketplace. Cars have had their physics significantly evolved, so it doesn't feel like you're steering a bathtub filled with concrete at every turn.

MICHAEL

'What Happened Next' Guy Age: Early 40s



● Leaving the life of crime behind him after making a deal with the FIB, former bank robber Michael now resides among the upper class on the surrounding hills of Los Santos, enjoying life's finer things, spending his days drinking and lounging poolside between exchanging barbed words with his wife, Audra. Life isn't as sweet as it appears with a marriage strained to breaking point and his two kids, Tracy and Jimmy, simply not giving the old man the time of day. Unfortunately, all three of them are frittering away what little cash remains from his lawless days, as Michael is forced to bankroll the luxurious lifestyles of his over-privileged and ungrateful family. It is the financial woes that eventually force Michael to return to the life of crime, a decision that reignites a fire and drive inside the character that he hasn't felt in years.

Skills: Natural leader, keen strategist and handy with a firearm



When switching between protagonists, the camera will rise above the city to a Google Earth-like viewpoint before crashing back down on top of the chosen character. During missions a character radial makes the swap instantaneous.

While *GTA V* isn't likely to reach the lofty heights of *Saints Row*'s puerile absurdity, Rockstar has imbued Los Santos with a sense of joviality sorely missing in *GTA IV*. Will jetpacks return? We're betting on it.

Dynamic missions are an interesting twist lifted straight from the barren topography of *Red Dead*'s Wild West. You might find yourself walking through the desert and stumbling over a drug deal gone bad, *No Country For Old Men*-style.

Shooting has undergone a similar transformation to vehicle handling. Clearly Rockstar has learnt its lesson and let the polished shooting inform *GTA*'s much maligned gunplay.

In the past, *Grand Theft Auto* stole much of its brilliance by emulating the silver screen, employing A-list voice talent to get behind the angular faces and replicating some of the most iconic moments in celluloid history – a motif that became more evident in *Red Dead* and *LA Noire*.

Times have changed for the studio's tentpole franchise, though, Rockstar having dumped the celebrity talent and become more concerned with manufacturing its own credible narrative. One of the first collaborative missions has Michael, Franklin and Trevor employed by government organisation FIB and tasked with extracting a target from a skyscraper located in the heart of downtown.

Players must pilot a helicopter, rappel down the office block and participate in a breathtaking smash-and-grab mission high above the sidewalks to succeed. What's more, the three characters each have their own specific role, with Michael performing the main extraction, while Franklin watches from a neighbouring rooftop armed with a sniper rifle and Trevor pilots the helicopter. If you want, you can stick with just the one character throughout the mission, or bring up a radial to instantaneously switch between the three at any point.

TACKLING MISSIONS IN A MULTITUDE OF WAYS HAS ALWAYS BEEN A HALLMARK OF GRAND THEFT AUTO, BUT IT'S AN IDEA HYPER-INTENSIFIED BY GTA V'S SPLIT PERSPECTIVE AND JACKED-UP SETPIECES

It's a diverse, varied and arresting setpiece, rocketing from the initial infiltration, through to the office shootout and capping the caper with a taut helicopter chase where the player can either manoeuvre the 'copter or go the violent route and fire off rounds at the enemy pursuer. It assures a range of gameplay tastes are catered for across each character and enlivens action sequences before they stagnate. There's even a suggestion that Rockstar might be eyeing co-op in segments when the three characters pool resources.

Tackling missions in a multitude of ways has always been a hallmark of *Grand Theft Auto*, but it's an idea hyper-intensified by *GTA V*'s split perspective and jacked-up setpieces. If Rockstar is to be believed, the profusion of content revealed to date represents the game running in a lower gear, with promises of escalating action sequences and no more laborious fetch quests to bog what should be, with three characters, swift pacing.

As the next generation looms ever closer, *Grand Theft Auto V* is Rockstar's one last big job before it retires to sunnier climes. Here's hoping that it can pull it off.

THE FUTURE IS HERE



METAL GEAR SOLID: GROUND ZEROES

Hideo Kojima's latest is looking Foxy

INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions
Release: Late 2013

There's nothing quite so confounding as untangling the knotted narrative of *Metal Gear Solid*, except, perhaps, the Twitter feed of Hideo Kojima. The developer has been leaving allusive notes between snapshots of lunchtime indulges for the better part of a year, each offering a tantalising glimpse at the capabilities of the Fox Engine. A photorealistic horse in a boardroom here, a photorealistic horse in the forest there, or even a photorealistic horse in the dark to cap things off. As no end of accurately rendered equine examples were rolled out, questions were raised as to what game this could possibly relate to, or even which console generation.

Needless to say, *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* was the answer – a very much current-gen endeavour from Kojima Productions. It's with the canny use of a series of filters, lighting effects and other impressive technical feats that the Fox Engine is able to produce startling visuals on today's hardware, but it has also enabled Kojima to take the series in a slightly different direction. Much has been made of the open-world setting, but far from having a vast, traversable world to explore, players will be dropped into a small region to infiltrate secure locations, using the environment, vehicles and air support to achieve their objectives. Choppers can be customised with a theme tune, which is, well, rather cool. But mostly it'll be classic 'tactical espionage action', crawling, subduing and stealthily going about business.

Acting as a prologue to *MGS5*, the bigger mystery surrounding *Ground Zeroes* is the setting and the protagonist. Fans were quick to spot the difference between the grizzled, grey-haired Snake of the trailer and the younger-looking hero featured in the poster, and although Kojima quickly refuted any conspiracies, there are certainly some tricksy goings-on behind *Ground Zeroes*. The setting appears to be some time after *Peace Walker* in the late Seventies and the Snake on display is likely Big Boss. Yet the inverted FOX/XOF logo in the trailer and images, alongside the tagline 'From FOX, two phantoms were born' suggests that the plot might explore the war between Big Boss and the Patriots, which gave birth to Solid Snake.

It's hard to think of a more exciting time for the franchise. With Kojima actively pushing the next core entry in a bold new direction and Platinum Games' *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* cutting its own unique appeal, *Metal Gear Solid* is primed to dominate 2013.

TRIVIA

Alongside the announcement of the game back in August, Kojima announced that a big-screen adaption of the series is finally in the works. Whether this'll work is up for debate right now.

■ Left: If you thought previous games were big, wait until you see all of their provinces combined in *The Elder Scrolls Online*.

INFORMATION

Format: PC
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: ZeniMax Online
Release: 2013

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

A realm re-imagined

INSIGHT

"[We want] players to be able to experience the epic *Elder Scrolls* universe with their friends," said Matt Firor, game director. Apparently, this is something that fans have asked for.

***The Elder Scrolls Online* has attracted plenty of blindsided detractors since its unveiling in May due to its *WOW*-like stylised art direction**. Perhaps that's why Bethesda has remained so infuriatingly tight-lipped about the project in the subsequent months, only recently breaking cover to release a nine-minute gameplay video teeming with revealing details. No doubt such a confident showcase was needed, not only to reaffirm the game's overt potential but also to adequately differentiate the MMO in a genre littered with indistinguishable licences and dwindling server numbers. But ZeniMax Online's ambition is unparalleled, encompassing the topography of Morrowind, Oblivion and Skyrim into the larger world map – a significant portion of which has yet to be explored in the series. And while it might pack the odd surprise or two for veteran *Elder Scrolls* fans, much of *The Elder Scrolls Online* will stay faithful to the core tenets of the series. Combat particularly remains in line with the traditional mechanics, with attacks and blocks tied to the mouse, rather than hotkeys – but whether animations can shuck the stiff responsiveness of the genre remains to be seen. With the game taking place a thousand years before the events of *Skyrim*, ZeniMax has taken advantage of the era in the lore, especially in the Imperial homeland of Cyrodiil, serving as the game's PvP component. Here, players can join comrades in large-scale sieges, using trebuchets and catapults to aid one of the three warring factions. It's an impressive display, and surely enough to give the sceptical fan base something to Fus Ro Dah about.

■ Below: The interaction between Joel and young Ellie will be pivotal to both the storytelling and the gameplay in *The Last Of Us*.

THE LAST OF US

Naughty Dog gets left for dead

As Microsoft gears down on the 360 while the industry edges closer to a new gaming era, Sony has taken the opposite approach, accelerating towards the finishing line with some of its most interesting software titles of this generation. Among the triptych of *The Last Guardian*, *Beyond* and *The Last Of Us*, the latter is the glaringly conventional entry in Sony's bold year ahead. But easy accusations of '*Uncharted* with zombies' should be avoided, as kitschy pastiche is a stranger among a sombre post-apocalyptic worldview. Naughty Dog has played down all horror beats to date, but evidence suggests a balance between action-adventure tropes and survival horror gameplay. Yes, that last part might come as something of a surprise as it has been a widely overlooked component, but look no further than the actions of the gruff Joel and his teenage companion Ellie: avoiding straight-up confrontation with other survivors, preferring to skulk in the shadows and circumvent enemies. When a violent action is necessitated, it's utilising objects in the environment and pooling ammo that remains a priority, rather than brash action. But what we've seen to date has been a mere suggestion of such a direction, rather than a full-blown declaration of intent. It still remains to be seen how far Naughty Dog – and, to an extent, Sony – pushes the tone, but as traditional survival horror developers gravitate towards the allure of bombastic cinematic action, wouldn't be refreshing to see the other side do the exact opposite?

INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Naughty Dog
Release: 2013



TOMB RAIDER

CONCEPT Crystal Dynamics is bringing gritty new life to the *Tomb Raider* franchise.

This lady is not for turning...

Games, just like the other modern storytelling media, have a language all their own used to communicate concepts and immerse their audience. With the upcoming *Tomb Raider* reboot, it's increasingly looking like Crystal Dynamics is using as many of the visual, story and, through some clever genre-blending, even gameplay traits of the medium as it can to make *Tomb Raider* a very multifaceted experience.

Part of the overall malaise with the franchise was arguably that, at her core, Lara Croft remained rooted in early Nineties sensibilities – as a brash, invincible female Indiana Jones who no longer played to modern audiences. So it was understandable that Crystal Dynamics initially chose to focus upon its more realistic take on Lara as a suffering ingénue, trapped on an island where she's hunted by wild animals and abused by marooned crazies after her expedition to discover the mythical kingdom of Queen Himiko is shipwrecked off the coast of Japan. With this vulnerable, confused and afraid lead, *Tomb Raider* initially feels like much more of a survival horror game, and that's driven by some stunning visuals as we're thrust right into this world of stormy beachfront vistas with impossible cliffs to scale; dark, claustrophobic caves; pagan temples filled with bloody, spiked pitfalls and lush forests to explore. Far closer camera views and more dynamic angles than are traditional accentuate this. Even the usual gaming bugbears like QTEs feel fresh, placed in stylish visual context rather than being plastered on screen. The centre of attention, we discover in a set piece spent scrambling to escape a collapsing cave, is always Lara's struggle for survival.

/// But while the early parts of the game focus on that primal struggle, its evolving mechanics are looking designed to help Crystal Dynamics deliver a meaningful story arc as Lara moves from helpless innocent to rugged, deadly survivor. At the centre of this evolution are new survival skills that Lara's constantly learning. She's already clearly gifted given her 'survival vision', an *Arkham Asylum*-style filter that temporarily highlights interactive objects, objectives and even enemies in your view. That's built upon with a plethora of skills, upgraded with XP from hunting animals, killing the island's inhabitants and discovering new locations. They're divided in our demo into Survivor, which includes the ability to scavenge for more bits to upgrade Lara's tools or retrieve spent arrows, and Hunter, which leans more towards combat-based skills. When upgraded at campfires dotted around key points in the world, which also let you upgrade weapons, these mechanics promise to radically transform the hunted girl.

Lara's combat skills grow from necessity. Our first weapon is a bow used to hunt for food and fend off the island's terrifying wolf packs, but they're swiftly turned on our human aggressors. Not only do we quickly become proficient at shooting enemies in the head, which grants additional XP, but we learn to choke unaware cultists from behind, stagger them with blows from our axe, and even deliver a nasty coup de grace to stunned foes. We get hold of a Japanese WWII pistol and close to the end of the demo even engage in pitched battles using a machine gun as we storm a complex filled with dozens of foes. Her evolving combat skills aren't the only feather in Lara's cap, and *Tomb Raider* is promising to take natural-feeling traversal to another level as you evolve new climbing abilities by unlocking tools, such as a climbing axe that lets you explore the island's heights.

> "Tomb Raider's still an action game at heart. The survival tone is more in the action-adventure formula"
> **BRIAN HORTON, CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**

The aim, then, is to back *Tomb Raider*'s coming-of-age narrative with real mechanical growth, and it's a welcome direction as there's a hint of the masochistic to Lara's early, harrowing encounters. But as she becomes increasingly self-sufficient, we start to feel liberated. At one point Lara remarks how easy it was to kill her attackers, and it doesn't feel like a quip, but a reflection on how the game gets across this forced transformation as realistically as it does. It isn't clear whether *Tomb Raider*'s mélange of survival horror, action-adventure and RPG elements will all quite come together, but with this multifaceted approach, for the first time in years, a *Tomb Raider* game feels like it has something new to say, and we're listening intently.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Release: 5 March 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The current keeper of the *Tomb Raider* flame is no stranger to gritty, believable heroes faced by daunting odds. One of Crystal Dynamics' early successes as a publisher was the *Legacy Of Kain* series, featuring the titular newly resurrected vampire in the complex, dark fantasy world of Nosgoth.

Developer History

Tomb Raider: Underworld **2008 [Multi]**

Tomb Raider: Anniversary **2007 [Multi]**

Legacy Of Kain: Soul Reaver **1999 [Multi]**

Blood Omen: Legacy Of Kain **1996 [Multi]**

High Point

It might not have gone quite far enough, but *Tomb Raider: Underworld* helped cement Crystal Dynamics' ownership of the modern *Tomb Raider* franchise. Better yet, it hinted that, given free rein, the developer could revitalise the series.



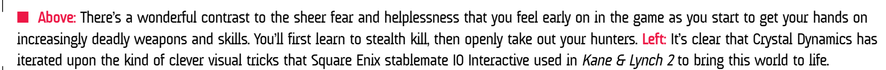
Right: There's a real sense of natural motion and some very thrilling moments as you master Lara's ability to traverse the island's environments.





THAT CLASSIC ADVENTURING SPIRIT

WITH ALL THE survival horror and all-out action elements of this particular *Tomb Raider*, it's easy to forget that Lara is supposed to be a genuine explorer. To counter that, the myth of the legendary Queen Himiko is both used to drive parts of the narrative and to allow for the inclusion of hidden tombs that players can discover across the island. Within these catacombs, the emphasis is on platform and puzzle play, and it's extremely satisfying to solve them with your platforming prowess. It's an idea augmented by little secrets scattered across the island, such as relics from Himiko's kingdom or the diaries of people like WWII soldiers who hint at a darkly supernatural mystery…



Above: There's a wonderful contrast to the sheer fear and helplessness that you feel early on in the game as you start to get your hands on increasingly deadly weapons and skills. You'll first learn to stealth kill, then openly take out your hunters. **Left:** It's clear that Crystal Dynamics has iterated upon the kind of clever visual tricks that Square Enix stablemate IO Interactive used in *Kane & Lynch 2* to bring this world to life.



Inset: *Watch Dogs* is still being presented as a current-gen title, but we suspect it to lead Ubisoft's next-gen push.

TRIVIA

Ubisoft has also announced a mobile app to coincide with the game's release next year. It'll enable players to hack into the console game. If it works, it could be incredibly innovative for games.

INFORMATION

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: TBA 2013

WATCH DOGS

Who watches the watchdogs?

Well? Are you watching them? Don't. Ubisoft's not-next-gen-but-obviously-next-gen action game isn't actually about keeping an eye on canines. It's a high-tech spin on the modern age and the proliferation of personal information, with hackers able to dig up any little piece of data about just about anybody. But it goes beyond that, digital infrastructures begging to be cracked, twisted and broken by someone with mad enough hacking skills. Which, as luck would have it, protagonist Aiden Pierce has in spades.

There's more than a slight nod to Ubisoft's own *Assassin's Creed* in the presentation and structure, though in *Watch Dogs* you're far more likely to use a sneaky piece of hacking to bring down a target than a hidden blade. Hacking traffic lights to cause pile-ups, phone-tapping to get a bit of background on a target… Pretty much any piece of technology can be repurposed, even down to the city's train network.

But as interesting and original as this central premise may be, Ubisoft has done little to ease concerns that the game could very easily descend into generic cover shooter territory at the slightest provocation. As awesome as the game's techno-silliness is, most situations look to bottleneck into fairly standard firefights, and if this isn't kept in check, guns will end up overpowering all of Pierce's 21st Century superpowers. We clearly hope that's not the case, mind.

Multiplayer, too, is an interesting opportunity, if one that Ubisoft has only really teased so far. Open world games lend themselves well to original co-op and competitive play modes, so we can't wait to see where the team takes this. Initial impressions are that there will be stories and missions that run parallel to the core narrative, though whether this means that groups could have a direct impact on the solo game à la *Resident Evil 6*'s intriguing Agent Hunt remains to be seen. Weaving these two distinct aspects into one coherent whole would be a challenge, sure, but certainly not one beyond the capabilities of this talented team.

> "Watch Dogs goes beyond the limits of today's open world games"
> JONATHAN MORIN, UBISOFT MONTREAL

There's also the connectivity angle to consider, and given the game's deep-seated technological themes, this is an aspect the team would be foolish not to consider. With a companion app for the game on phones and tablets already announced, mission progress and extra augmented reality functionality could easily be added to enrich the experience, plus there are grounds for a little more techno-terrorism there too – why not allow players to 'hack' one another's real-world devices, scoring extra details on outstanding story missions or impeding their progress somehow. Interesting stuff. Lots of potential there, then. We just hope Ubisoft can capitalise on it all…





FORTNITE

Minecraft meets L4D as Unreal Engine 4 debuts

INFORMATION **Format:** PC **Publisher:** Epic Games **Developer:** In-house **Release:** TBA 2013

It's Horde mode by way of *Minecraft* for Epic's next venture, a co-op shooter with a visual style not too far removed from Valve's sublime *Team Fortress 2*. By day, players will be tasked with scavenging materials to fortify their defences, while at night, all manner of nasties will come out to play – they'll trash all your hard work if given the chance, but it's nothing a few well-placed bullets can't stop.

It's still without a precise release date, but we do know that *Fortnite* will be the first game to use Unreal Engine 4, even if the cartoony visuals might not be the best showcase for the insane capabilities of Epic's next-gen tech. Still, bringing together so many du jour elements and themes, *Fortnite* is all but guaranteed to be a huge success. And from what we've seen of the game so far, it deserves to be as well.

FUSE

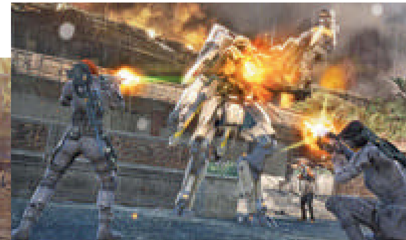
Resistance dev goes gritty

INFORMATION
Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: EA
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: March 2013

It might appear to have lost some of its identity and appeal in evolving from cartoony co-op shooter *Overstrike* to more subdued, familiar third-person shooter *Fuse*, but fear not. Insomniac's first multiplatform release carries no less of the studio's playful edge. A cast of larger-than-life characters, a nonsensical arsenal and a tendency to be a little bit silly are all present and correct, calling back to the best bits of both the *Ratchet & Clank* and *Resistance* franchises.

But at the same time, *Fuse* is very much its own entity. Score attack elements are seldom seen in co-op games yet here work brilliantly – proper co-ordination and combining powers with those of other players is numerically rewarded, making teamwork an integral part of the game. But launching early in 2013 alongside giants like *BioShock Infinite* and *Revengeance* could certainly hurt *Fuse*.







Right: Obsidan Entertainment will surely load *The Stick Of Truth* with a huge amount of character customisation.

TRIVIA
Obsidian has confirmed that *The Stick Of Truth* will feature Kinect functionality on Xbox 360, enabling players to verbally berate Cartman. We're sure you can think of creative things to shout.

INFORMATION
Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Release: April 2013

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

Beeeeeeeefcaaaaakkkkkeeee!

With all the production values and humour of the popular show, *The Stick Of Truth* stands to right the wrongs of *South Park*'s traumatic gaming history – from *Chef's Luv Shack* to the dire N64 shooter, the series really hasn't been very well represented to date, which is a damn shame. You could potentially drop Cartman and the boys into pretty much any genre and make it work, though we have to say that a traditional RPG wasn't our first thought.

But it does work. Obsidian knows its way around classic RPG mechanics and its ability shines through, backing up the game's show-perfect visuals with gameplay to match. If nothing else, creating your own *South Park* character and trying to fit into the existing cast is a delight, character customisation options both letting you look the part and deck yourself out with all kinds of new abilities and perks. Should be a dream come true for fans of the series, so long as the humour can hold up.

■ Right: Spark Unlimited grabbed the attention of Capcom after presenting a demo for an unreleased game.

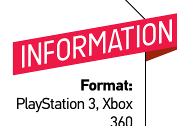
INSIGHT

"With *Lost Planet 3* we've kind of taken a back-to-basics approach. We wanted to tell a character-driven story set on a hostile planet that's always trying to kill him," says Matt Sophos.

LOST PLANET 3

Spark Unlimited discusses being entrusted with Capcom's shooter

Capcom is ever aware of the changing times. Not wanting to be forgotten like so of its peers, it's taken to outsourcing its biggest properties to Western developers in an attempt to capture the elusive market. Recently we've seen *Devil May Cry* given a reboot and moved into the care of Ninja Theory, and now *Lost Planet* has been delivered into the arms of Spark Unlimited. What challenges face a studio that has flown under the radar for so long when two of the biggest games of 2013 come knocking? **games™** speaks with Matt Sophos about taking on development of *Lost Planet 3* with Capcom, and *Ninja Gaiden Z* with Tecmo Koei.



INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Spark Unlimited
Release: TBA 2013

■ Below: While Spark Unlimited will be introducing a swathe of changes, there will be plenty for long-term fans to recognise.

How does it feel to handle two of the biggest games of 2013?

Since we have two completely separate teams working on each game, I can really only speak to the *Lost Planet* side of things, and I can tell you that to have the opportunity to tell a story in such a vivid and well-established franchise is as incredibly exciting as it is daunting. I'm acutely aware that there are certain expectations that come from fans of the franchise, but I also hope gamers who haven't had a chance to play a *Lost Planet* game will give *LP3* a shot and really enjoy it on its own merits.

Why do you think two of the most prominent Japanese developers have approached your studio to handle two beloved licences?

I think part of the reason Capcom chose us – and I don't want to put words in anyone's mouths – is that we were honest from the outset about what we liked and thought we should retain from the previous games, but equally honest about what we thought could be cumbersome and wasn't something we should focus on. We didn't go into the initial meetings blowing smoke and just nodding our heads. We knew that if the partnership was going to work, we all had to feel comfortable enough to be honest about our goals and expectations.

What's the secret to a successful Eastern and Western collaboration?

It's kind of tough to pinpoint, really. One aspect is keeping an open and honest dialogue with your partner. Breaking down as many barriers to communication is also incredibly important, and we were lucky enough to have our producer on the Capcom side, Andrew Szymanski, work from the Tokyo office and be fluent in Japanese and English. He was able to mitigate any problems that otherwise could get lost in translation.

Finally, a big part of it is just the personalities involved. A development team, both internally and with a publishing partner, is kind of like trying a new recipe. You hope you have all the right ingredients that complement each other, but you don't really know if you've got a great dish until you're pretty far along.

> "I think part of the reason Capcom chose us is that we were honest from the outset"
> MATT SOPHOS, SPARK UNLIMITED



How much input have you had in the direction of *Lost Planet 3*? Was it a case of Capcom bringing the concept to you, or was it collaboration on everything from the get-go?

It was definitely collaboration from the beginning. At the kick-off of *LP3*'s development, Oguro-san and a crew from Capcom would visit every few weeks. We'd sit around a table and work through exactly what we wanted the



Left: Aiming for the glowing orange bit is pretty much the goal of every *Lost Planet* game.

game to be. Oguro-san and his team wanted to roll up their sleeves and dive in with us to help craft something that would be more than the sum of its parts. We could learn things from them and they could learn things from us. They gave us a lot of room to focus on our expertise of telling a story with Western sensibilities and gameplay mechanics, but always helped keep us on a path to making a game that still feels like a 'Capcom game'. That was vitally important.

Are there any difficulties as an external developer in terms of freedom, especially when dealing with established properties?

As far as freedom goes, with an established franchise like *Lost Planet* you always have some kind of box that you have to work within. I actually like having some of these kinds of restrictions because it gives you a line to draw in the sand and say, 'Everything on this side of the line fits into what *Lost Planet* is. Everything else should be discarded.'

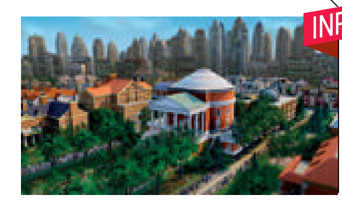
What aspects are core to the *Lost Planet* franchise and what elements are you hoping to improve upon?

There are several themes and details that tie directly into other games in the franchise like a couple of legacy characters, established creatures, and the return to the 'extreme conditions' that typified the first game. Ultimately, we're looking to provide players with a highly immersive experience with a lot of gameplay options. We felt like, by taking the game into prequel territory, we could tell a more personal story than had been attempted before and shift from the smaller, armed to the teeth Vital Suits from *Lost Planet 1* and *2* to something bigger and more 'manual'. We wanted to tell a character-driven story set on a hostile planet that's always trying to kill him. The beauty of the *Lost Planet* franchise is that it's never been defined as just one thing.

***Legendary* and *Turning Point: Fall Of Liberty* were not well received critically. How has the studio reacted to that? Are you expecting some trepidation from the *Lost Planet* and *Ninja Gaiden* fan bases?**

I can definitely understand hardcore fans holding their breath and reserving judgement. I always secretly hope that gamers understand that an independent studio is constantly transforming. It's especially so for a studio that has had a few misses, shrunk down, and fought and scrapped just to stay alive. The same team that made those other games isn't the same team making this one. In this industry, your studio is only as good as its last game – it's pretty unforgiving that way – so we have to go out and prove to everyone that *Lost Planet 3* is something they should take note of. That's completely on us. Spark, like most independent developers that have been able to survive for any length of time, has obviously had its share of ups and downs. Having Capcom as a partner and getting the chance to work on this project is so much more fulfilling for us as a team and as a studio.





INFORMATION

Format: Mac, PC
Publisher: EA
Developer: Maxis Emeryville
Release: February

SIMCITY

FOR OVER two decades, EA has asked you to construct, develop and maintain a city. Now it is putting your city on the map and asking you to change the world. Expect multi-management at its finest, creating a robust multiplayer experience.



INFORMATION

Format: PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: 8 February

DEAD SPACE 3

DEAD SPACE 2 is without a doubt one of the finest survival-horror games of the past ten years, so expectations are therefore high above the stratosphere for the co-op focused ice-cold sequel. Imagine *Kane And Lynch* set against a sci-fi backdrop for a better idea of how Visceral is handling the two-player campaign.



INFORMATION

Format: PC
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Relic
Release: March

COMPANY OF HEROES 2

IT'S BEEN six years since *Company Of Heroes* delighted players with a refreshing take on WWII wargames, and now developer Relic is shifting the theatre of war to the Eastern Front, promising control of the Red Army on some of history's most ferocious battlegrounds.



INFORMATION

Format: 3DS, Wii U
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: March

MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE

THE HUNT is back on, and more connected then ever. With local co-op play between the Wii U and 3DS versions, as well as the ability to take your save data on the move, *Monster Hunter 3* is promising big for its next-gen debut.





1 AN EARLY announcement for the game was the ability to nose around homesteads of people you've crossed paths with via StreetPass. Additionally, you'll be able to explore their creative efforts across an entire town via the new Dream mode, which is initiated when the player receives a massage and starts dreaming.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Katsuya Eguchi's division of Nintendo EAD is developing the long-awaited 3DS debut of *Animal Crossing* and is among the illustrious company's most talented internal teams. Its back catalogue includes an earlier handheld *Animal Crossing* adventure, *Wild World*, alongside another DS spin-off, *Star Fox Command*. Yet, it's Eguchi's fundamental contribution to the Nintendo Wii launch line-up that has cemented his division's legacy, developing the worldwide waggle sensation that is *Wii Sports* for the system.

Developer History

Nintendo Land
2012 [Wii U]

Wii Sports Resort
2009 [Wii]

Wii Sports
2006 [Wii]

Animal Crossing: Wild World
2005 [DS]

High Point

The bewildering impact of the family-friendly *Wii Sports* transformed the industry almost overnight. Microsoft and Sony's gainful gaze would soon turn to the casual marketplace.

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF

CONCEPT ■ A stereoscopic return to *Animal Crossing*, boasting new multiplayer features that further enhance the franchise.

Not your usual creature comforts

Detractors have been quick to bemoan new iterations of *Animal Crossing* as a simple rehash of what is now a decade-old formula. Who can blame them? The life sim has been reluctant to evolve since its original N64 outing, stumbling with each creative baby step while Nintendo's more notable properties advance in unfettered strides.

But as before, new hardware has renewed our hope. *Animal Crossing*'s new stereoscopic abode contains a wealth of potential for the franchise, expanding on the core tenets that have been a mainstay of the series since its inception. Expected visual enhancements to bolster the 3D capabilities are exactly that: expected. But it's how the 3DS debut will utilise features such as StreetPass – which remains one of the least explored facets of Nintendo's handheld, despite its potential – that should encourage and nurture the essence of *Animal Crossing* unlike any previous instalment. Released in Japan during November but still lacking a concrete European release date, it won't be long before we can find out, but as the title suggests, it looks like it might be turning over a new leaf.





4 *NEW LEAF* is the first opportunity for players to act as mayor. This invites a wealth of options, not least appeasing grandiose town-wide design whims, including the ability to build roads, alongside smaller character adjustments. You'll also have a Shih Tzu secretary, that'll no doubt grow to despise your very presence, you letch.



6 IF YOU want to get away from it all, you can take an excursion via a quick motorboat ride to a new tropical island. It's not the first *Animal Crossing* to feature a sunny escape, but a focus on co-op mini-games makes it the most tantalising retreat. Winning one of the games rewards players with medals, which can then be traded at the souvenir shop.



2 THERE'S A greater range of activities to participate in this time around. One of the most prominent is watching a stand-up show, which enables players to input a reaction to jokes. There's also Club 444, where dog musician KK Slider will host a Saturday night DJ gig, and a revolving sushi bar.

3 AS YOUR pipsqueak proportions have been tweaked, so too have the various denizens, with each pinched and pulled to better reflect their real-life animal counterparts. Regardless of how far you push the 3D slider, there's a more pronounced scale on show, which adds greater dynamism to the world.

5 THERE'S PLENTY of work to go around, and as we all know, being the mayor is a thankless task, so there's the option to work part-time at the town's cafe as respite. Here you'll be rewarded with unique furniture items for your house, and better-acquainted villages will send you photos that you can display in your luxurious home.

7 YET, IT wouldn't be *Animal Crossing* without some familiar faces. Jolly sailor Kapp'n will transport you to the aforementioned tropical paradise, there's the return of KK Slider (now DJ KK), and the most entrepreneurial raccoon we've ever met, Tom Nook, returns with a new job.

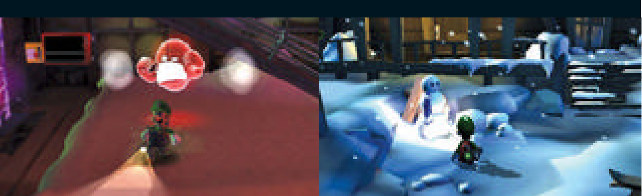


INFORMATION **Format:** 3DS **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Early 2013

LUIGI'S MANSION: DARK MOON

Nintendo's own Ghostbuster returns

N*intendo Land*'s superb *Luigi's Ghost Mansion* reaffirmed our love for the original – a wildly uncharacteristic Mario launch game that saw Luigi take centre stage as a reluctant ghostbuster, hunting for his missing brother in a haunted house. This long-awaited sequel is coming to the 3DS and being developed by Next Level Games (*Punch-Out!!, Super Mario Strikers*). The clean-rooms-of-ghosts-to-progress gameplay will remain, with the most notable change being how Luigi will now stun and capture enemies. Still armed with his trusty Poltergust 5000, he will need to daze ghosts with a charged 'strobe' attack, which exposes hit spots for his vacuum-powered attacks. *Dark Moon* is also said to have a bigger emphasis on puzzles, and offer more mansions to explore. The latter is certainly a good move, because as good as the original was, it was a bit short.





Above: Given Gilbert's previous games, we fully expect *The Cave* to contain a few in-jokes and winks to his classic adventure games.

INFORMATION

Format: Pc, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Double Fine
Release: January 2013

THE CAVE

Stepping out of the dark

One name in particular has us looking forward to Double Fine's latest digital game, and that name is Ron Gilbert. From the mind behind adventure classics such as *Maniac Mansion*, *Day Of The Tentacle* and *Monkey Island*, *The Cave* marks the first game from Gilbert since reuniting with fellow LucasArts alumni Tim Schafer at Double Fine Productions. Based on an unrealised idea that Gilbert's had in his head for some 20 years, *The Cave* will blend the object-focused puzzles and team elements of *Maniac Mansion* with gameplay in the tradition of platformer puzzlers like *Metroid* and *The Lost Vikings*. Coated in a stylish comic veneer and taking place in a mysterious talking cave, it looks set to offer plenty of replayability and effective humour. Double Fine has been very consistent in the digital gaming space, and *The Cave* could have the potential to be its best offering yet.

INSIGHT

"I would actually really enjoy making another [*Monkey Island* game] – the real, third *Monkey Island* game," says Ron Gilbert, from Double Fine Productions. We want that too, we really do.

XCOM

A well-known enemy

In some ways the pressure is off 2K Marin a little. Now that Firaxis' *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* has given the vocal and hardcore fans the tactical squad-based alien-zapping sequel they wanted, the stage is now more comfortably set for the studio to do something different with the franchise. Originally scheduled for a 2011 release, *XCOM* has had a less than smooth ride. We won't go into finer details, but fan reaction to it has been less than favourable, and the project has suffered a few delays. However, it's the finished product that counts, and it's promising that this wait has been accredited to 2K wanting to get the FPS feeling more in tune with classic *XCOM*. With the combat receiving a re-examination, players will be given more control and leadership over their squad of alien investigators, retain the ability to research and equip alien technology, and find the action refocused towards tactical, squad-based gunplay.

INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: In-house
Release: Late 2013

TRIVIA

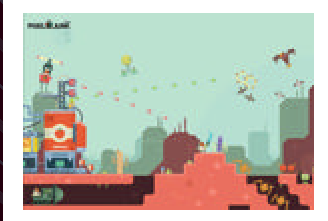
XCOM has been passed around internal 2K Games development studios for years. At one point *BioShock* developer Irrational Games was working on the project. With all the change, will it keep its clarity?



Above: Now Firaxis' excellent RTS has won plaudits aplenty, no doubt 2K's FPS will be unfairly compared to *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*.

PIXELJUNK 1-6

Format: PC
Publisher: Q-Games
Developer: In-house

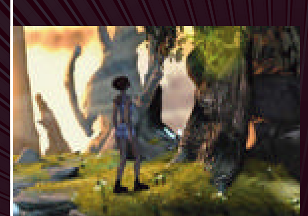


■ Q-GAMES has unveiled the still unnamed *PixelJunk 1-6,* which is heading to PC first, rather than the PlayStation 3. While the developer has yet to disclose details about the game, a plethora of screenshots reveal octopus-type creatures, bird things and other peculiar otherworldly creatures on an alien planet being made into soup. The game is being designed for Steam and Big Picture mode, featuring four-player multiplayer – that's the same number of staff working on the game.

DREAMFALL CHAPTERS

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Red Thread Games

■ RAGNAR TORNQUIST recently departed from *The Secret World* developer Funcom to return to his adventure game roots. Launching new studio Red Thread Games, Tornquist's *Dreamfall Chapters* will be the next entry in *The Longest Journey,* which will release on PC and Mac, using Kickstarter to raise the necessary funds to get the project off the ground. However, Tornquist will still oversee the future development of *The Secret World.*



MEW-GENICS

Format: PC
Publisher: Team Meat
Developer: In-house

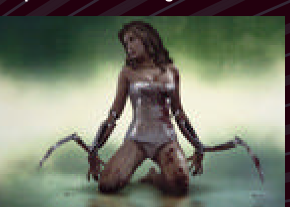


■ SLOWING DOWN development on *Super Meat Boy* for iOS and PC in order to work on its latest madcap invention, Team Meat's long-awaited follow-up to its debut anti-casual platformer is the peculiar *Mew-Genics.* "It's by far the strangest project I've ever worked on," said the duo behind Team Meat, revealing a few scant details about the game, including that it will be "randomly generated, strange and involve cats". Whatever it turns out to be, we've got high expectations from Team Meat.

CYBERPUNK 2077

Format: PC, TBA
Publisher: CD Projekt
Developer: In-house

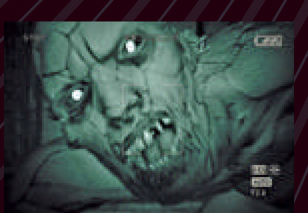
■ CD PROJEKT has announced that *Cyberpunk 2077* will be the next game released by the studio. Creator of the original *Cyberpunk 2020* pen-and-paper role-playing game Mike Pondsmith is working "very closely" with the studio on the adaptation. CD Projekt reasoned that the new setting was fantastical enough to allow it more freedom, also revealing that Night City – a location from the original – will be its first open-world setting.



OUTLAST

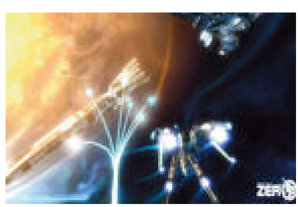
Format: PC
Publisher: Red Barrels
Developer: In-house

■ NEW INFO on first-person survival horror game *Outlast* is starting to leak out of new indie outfit Red Barrels. Ubisoft and Naughty Dog veterans founded the Montreal-based studio, and that triple-A experience is visible in the footage so far released. The core gameplay is stealth-based, with minimal weaponry to fight the ghoulish creatures of the world. There's even a hint of *Assassin's Creed* and *Uncharted* to what we've seen.



STRIKE SUIT ZERO

Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Born Ready Games



■ IT SEEMS barely a day passes without another high-profile Kickstarter campaign launches, though few developers take to the crowdsourcing website seeking funding for a multiformat title. Cartoony space-set action game *Strike Suit Zero* has been in development for some time, and Born Ready is seeking a further $100,000 to put the finishing touches to the game. Currently aiming for a January launch, *Strike Suit Zero* will support the Oculus Rift VR headset.

DEMON GAZE

Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Kadokawa Games
Developer: Experience Inc

■ RETURNING TO the world of *Students Of The Round,* Experience Inc's latest role-playing game, *Demon Gaze,* is set several hundred years after its first dungeon-crawler. In this world, demons take the form of machines, and the player steps into the role of the mysterious mortal named Oz, charged with sealing away the hellspawn forever with the demon-seeing power imbued in his own eyeball.



DEADLY PREMONITION

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Rising Star Games
Developer: Access Games



■ DID YOU know that *Deadly Premonition* holds the Guinness World Record of 'Most Critically Polarising Survival Horror Game'? Yeah, that exists. Despite receiving the most pointless accolade of all time, Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro's Marmite thriller makes a belated debut on the PlayStation 3, featuring refined controls and a new scenario created by Swery himself. Time to find out what all the *Deadly Premonition* fuss is about.



THE SHIP: FULL STEAM AHEAD

Format: PC
Publisher: Blazing Griffin
Developer: In-house



FIND YOUR killer before they find you. That was the simple concept behind *The Ship* back in 2006, often referred to as the precursor of the cat-and-mouse multiplayer in *Assassin's Creed*. Now UK indie outfit Blazing Griffin has launched a Kickstarter campaign for a sequel, *The Ship: Full Steam Ahead*, that will forgo the Twenties setting in favour of a richly detailed steampunk aesthetic. Hopefully the project will find greater success than the spiritual sequel *Bloody Good Time* a few years back.

SUMMON NIGHT 5

Format: PSP
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Flight-Plan

THE *SUMMON Night* series is making the leap from spites to realistically proportioned 3D models in the fifth main entry in the enduring series of RPGs. Takashi Iizuka's artwork has been superbly adapted to the new direction, which the player can more closely admire through the in-game character model viewer. It only remains to be seen whether the core gameplay has similarly evolved. From what we've seen so far, we're expecting beautiful things.



APOTHEAN

Format: PC
Publisher: Alientrap
Developer: In-house

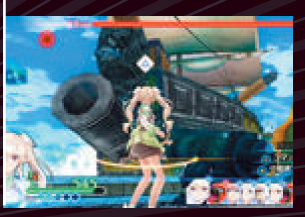


THE DEVELOPER of *Nodes Of Yesod*-inspired 2D platformer *Capsized*, Alientrap, has announced a 2D *Metroidvania* title named *Apothean*, set in ancient Greece. The game bears close resemblance to *God Of War*, with "humanity's last champion" tasked with murdering the gods and seizing their powers to prevent Hera destroying the world. Not an original idea, then, but its bold, pottery-style art and energetic action has certainly piqued our interest. There's certainly nothing around looking similar right now.

SHINING ARK

Format: PSP
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Media Vision

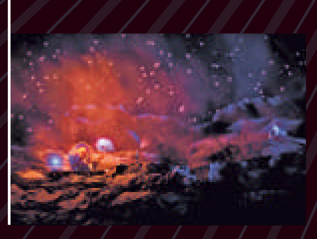
THE POPULARITY of Sony's PSP simply refuses to wane in its native land, and it's proved to be a popular platform for Sega's *Shining* series. The latest entry is destined for the handheld and certainly appears to be wringing every last drop of power out of the portable console. Tony Taka's art style is exquisite, and there's plenty of refinement to the core systems. It's just a shame that it'll likely remain another Japan-only release, so be prepared to import.



THE SWAPPER

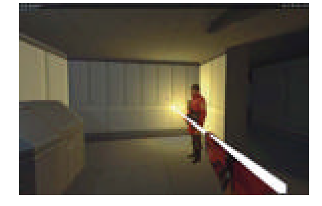
Format: PC
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Facepalm Games

***THE SWAPPER* has been kicking around in development for some time now. The clay model platformer has attracted some serious attention, not least garnering several indie awards. But it's the recent acquisition of FTL writer Tom Jubert to buff up core existential concepts that intrigues. Jubert's story deals with the ramifications inherent to the eponymous Swapper that enables players to shift consciousness from one body to another.**



0X10C

Format: PC
Publisher: Mojang
Developer: In-house



NOTCH'S *MINECRAFT* follow-up *0x10c* has been steadily gaining traction, with Markus Persson revealing a few of the ideas behind the space-set adventure game. One inspiration was short-lived sci-fi show *Firefly*, with Notch trying to emulate the same sense of bad luck, and quick improvisation required to survive the perils of deep space. What this equates to in gameplay terms is random ship damage, traversable planets and the ability to program the ship's 16-bit brain.

DRAGON QUEST VII

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house

AS THE remake business does gangbusters on the 3DS, Square Enix has delved into the archives and announced that PSone classic *Dragon Quest VII* will be next to get the remake treatment. The long-running series has found success on Nintendo platforms, with *Dragon Quest IV, V* and *VI* all ported to the DS a few years back. *Dragon Quest VII* will utilise StreetPass to enable players to share lithographs.



ETRIAN ODYSSEY IV

Format: Nintendo 3DS
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: In-house



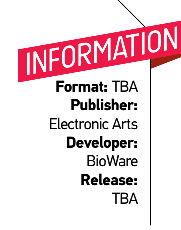
IT'S NO surprise that *Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends Of The Titan* arrives in North America early next year, given that the first three entries in the popular series received a Western release. Still, it's nice to have some confirmation on both its release and the inclusion of a 'Casual' mode that'll curtail much of the crushing difficulty that has to date made the RPG dungeon crawler exclusively an experience for the hardcore fan.

Above: *Dragon Age III* will be huge in scope, promising larger and more open-world environments than any of its predecessors.

DRAGON AGE III: INQUISITION

Bigger and better than ever

Details about the hugely anticipated sequel to BioWare's RPG series have been few and slow coming. However, its plan is clear: bigger and more epic. *Inquisition* will have larger, more open and varied environments than its predecessors – lead cinematic designer Jon Perry has stated that "one level in *Dragon Age III* is as big as all of the levels in *Dragon Age II*". The new territories will also have a greater impact over the direction that personal journeys will take, which will play out during a period of great civil unrest occurring in Thedas. With the templars and mages at war, players, controlling a new human protagonist, will get to travel to various regions in the game and decide whether to quell or promote the divergence that's occurred. *Inquisition* will also be broadening the number of customisation options available, and change the feel of combat a little. It will offer greater focus to a player's ability to form a more coherent and stronger party of players, and allow them to plan and strategise before wading into battle. An intriguing new castle-managing element is also said to feature, but quite how this will work is yet to be explained in any detail. And it's also been confirmed that players will be able to transfer their save files across from the first two games. Reported to be coming next autumn, *Inquisition* is sounding like the perfect title of 2013 to lock the door and disappear into.



INFORMATION
Format: TBA
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: BioWare
Release: TBA

WASTELAND 2

Introducing the crowd-funded game of the future

This was one of the big, record-breaking Kickstarter projects this year, raising over $2 million in funding and meeting its greenlight target in less than two days. The original *Wasteland* was a seminal computer game in 1988, and is widely credited for kicking off the post-apocalyptic action RPG genre, which lives on most strongly today through the *Fallout* series. In fact, *Wasteland* and *Fallout* actually share a close connection. *Wasteland*'s creator, Brian Fargo, was also the co-founder of Interplay, the company that published *Fallout* and its sequel back in the day. Now heading up inXile Entertainment, Fargo has wanted to make a sequel to *Wasteland* for a long time, stating it's a game he gets asked about frequently by wistful gamers. However, after getting no joy from the major publishers, he turned to Kickstarter and asked those fans to put their money where their mouths are. Thankfully, they had much to say. Fargo has reassembled many key members of the original *Wasteland* team and joined forces with Obsidian Entertainment for the project. He is also embracing the assistance of indie developers to help bring his vision for the sequel to life. *Wasteland 2* thus represents an intimate and transparent project for Fargo and his team. It will be interesting to see where this journey through uncharted game-making territories takes us next year.

TRIVIA
The goal of $900,000 was, at the time, the largest Kickstarter target yet. That didn't stop *Wasteland 2* passing that figure in under 43 hours. The fans were obviously keen to make it happen.



INFORMATION
Format: PC
Publisher: InXile
Developer: In-house
Release: October 2013

Above: Players will be in charge of a party of seven characters, but only four are player-controlled.



MULTIPLAYER MECHS

SINCE THE game doesn't shy away from emulating iconic moments from the series, we ask Neeley whether Power Loaders, which are already confirmed for single-player, will make an appearance in competitive multiplayer.

"That would be really amazing, wouldn't it?" he grins. "Imagine you were in a multiplayer situation where you were using military tactics to fend for yourself and survive the alien onslaught, while using all of the weapons and more that you've encountered in the films, that fit within that *Aliens* universe, including a Power Loader. That would be way cool."

The different Xenomorph variants have their own unique primary and secondary attacks. Like The Lurker, with its vicious tail swipe that can make a kebab out of a marine with a few well-placed strikes.

Below: The HUD has been stripped back, with all information displayed on devices within the game. For instance, the motion tracker is mapped to the left trigger, serving as both a way to track enemies and ramp up the tension.

Above: We got to play with two new multiplayer modes: Extermination is an objective mode similar to Domination, with certain points for marines to capture while aliens attack. Escape has four marines battle through checkpoints to reach the evac zone, while aliens have to wipe out the entire team.



ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

CONCEPT ■ A canonical sequel to James Cameron's *Aliens*, *Colonial Marines* pits the acid-drooling extraterrestrials against the titular soldiers.

Time to get a grip

It's while we're undergoing a lengthy pre-mission briefing, before we're given the first hands-on access to the Xenomorph portion of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' multiplayer, that the gathered combatants begin to muse on one topic: has any developer succeeded in creating a playable Xenomorph? While rose-tinted nostalgia recalls Rebellion's *Aliens Versus Predator* as a prime instance of success, the majority concede that the eponymous acid-bleeding vermin has had a pretty tough time of it over the last few years and has been a weak leak among its many FPS iterations.

As Chris Neeley, who has served more than a few tours of duty as art director in the military grunt FPS genre, joins **games™** to discuss the multiplayer, he's completely oblivious to our previous conversation. Yet it just so happens that he has been mulling over the very same subject, posing a pertinent question before we've even had a chance to hit record on our Dictaphone. "Remember when playing as a Xeno felt like Jell-O?" he asks with a Cheshire cat grin across his face. While we answer with an unequivocal affirmative, we're slightly taken aback by a developer so willing to invite criticism. But if anyone has earned such confidence this year it's Gearbox, its modesty no doubt buried snugly beneath *Borderlands 2*'s vault-sized revenue. And by all accounts *Colonial Marines* continues to demonstrate perhaps the ballsiest developer in the industry relishing fresh opportunities in a genre it understands better than anyone.

> "Even if we didn't want to make a multiplayer mode, it would have just reared its head – it's just so obvious"
> CHRIS NEELEY, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

/// In forgoing the first-person perspective in favour of a wider third-person viewpoint with heightened senses, the game makes it easier to gain a handle on the Xenomorph's range of movements and the ways in which it can appropriately utilise the environment to gain a tactical advantage. Gearbox has wisely toned down the speed, injected the right amount of heft, and distributed strength and weaknesses proportionately across a small range of distinct classes. The Spitter is effective at splitting marines apart, firing acid long-range to weaken enemy resolve and precisely aim a charged shot for a one-hit kill; Lurkers are a slightly darker breed, able to skulk in the shadows and jump on marines, but feature a smaller percentage of health; and the final type showcased during our demonstration is the Soldier class, which has an even distribution of attacking and defensive strength. There are smaller touches that distinguish the three, including special moves – mostly a variant on the skull-puncturing second jaw – but enough has been done to convey the benefits of each and emphasise the time investment to master them.

"It's old-school gaming in that you're not going to jump into the game and in five minutes have it mastered, as is the case in a lot of 'accessible' games," says Neeley. "You've got to get good at it. It's all about strategy, how you play, how you work with other people. That means you can't have Jell-O control for aliens; it's a precise, graceful beast that's perfect at what it does, so that has to be reflected through the field of view and the way it handles. You go back to being a marine and it feels like tunnel vision after playing with the extended senses of the alien."

Marines. We'd almost forgotten the second-billed component of *Aliens: Colonial Marines*' double act before our brief hands-on with the campaign. The canonical story involves a squad of marines dispatched to LV-426 to investigate the USS Sulaco in search of Ripley and the crew. While much of the story will retrace the footsteps of Cameron's film, elaborating on events and delving deeper into familiar locations, Neeley rebuts our suggestion that there will be a lack of environmental diversity.

"You get to go back to all the places that you know and love," he admits, "but you also get to explore more of LV-426. You get to see the underground water-cooling areas of the atmosphere processor; you get to revisit the Derelict crash and see what Weyland has been up to. You might see other stuff that may not make sense – you may think that marines are state of the art, but they're back in the Dark Ages compared to some of these Weyland guys. It'll feel like a different world."



Aliens: Colonial Marines has been swirling around in development limbo for a number of years and at one point was even due for release on the PlayStation 2.



Details

Format: PC, PS3, Wii U, Xbox 360
Origin: US
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Gearbox Software
Release: 12 February
Players: 1-6

Aliens Profile

Alien games endured inverted fortunes compared to the films during the Eighties and Nineties. While the earlier period represented a dearth in creativity for games, the latter brought a variety of worthwhile adaptations, from intense shoot-'em-ups to crossover first-person shooters.

Aliens History

Aliens Versus Predator **1999 [PC]**
Alien Trilogy **1996 [Multi]**
Alien 3: The Gun **1993 [Arcade]**
Alien **1982 [Atari 2600]**

High Point

The multiplayer in Rebellion's *Aliens Versus Predator* – the 1999 PC one, rather than the earlier Jaguar or later console adaptation – stands among the all-time great competitive shooters.

THE FUTURE IS HERE

INFORMATION

Format: PC, PS3. Xbox 360
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Irrational Games
Release: Early 2013

BIOSHOCK INFINITE

Not much has changed but we don't live underwater

As much as we respect and enjoy Rockstar's cinematic drip-feed of *GTA V* info, the Hollywood trailers for its next open world crime spree raise one very important question: what about the gameplay? That's the crucial difference between Irrational and so many other modern developers. The *BioShock* team knows that interesting, original gameplay sells itself far better than cutscene snippets and hipster-baiting soundtracks, which is why since its first proper reveal, *BioShock Infinite* has topped the most wanted lists of so many gamers.

Trading sea for sky, *Infinite* takes us up to Columbia, a sky city gone a bit wrong. But this isn't a Rapture kind of wrong; the plague sweeping this aerial fortress is of political origin, with several factions fighting for control of the monument to American exceptionalism. Similarly, its residents are addicted to power, patriotism and the American dream more than some otherworldly substance, Handymen and other Big Daddy analogues created as a show of America's scientific prowess rather than engineered as freakish bodyguards.

There are also comparisons to be drawn between the original's Plasmids and Tonics and *Infinite*'s Vigors and Nostrums. While immediately familiar in concept and indeed on a gameplay level, the two function slightly differently. With no Eve supplies to worry about, powers gained from Vigors are instead measured in charges, with the vials refillable along your journey. More interesting, though, is the fact that there'll be no Gene Bank equivalent – imbibe a Vigor or use a Nostrum and its effects are permanent, leaving players to decide early on just who they want their version of protagonist Booker DeWitt to be.

As evidenced by even the earliest gameplay footage, it'll be Elizabeth who really takes centre stage. The powerful female co-star is at the very heart of Columbia's civil war – not unlike Handsome Jack's plan to open *Borderlands 2*'s Vault using the power of the Sirens – each faction wants to use Elizabeth's powers to turn the tide in their favour and take control of the sky city for themselves. Even though she is entirely AI-controlled, you'll be able to combine your abilities with hers. And as much as this sounds awesome, Irrational will have to be extremely careful not to turn working together with Elizabeth into a drawn-out escort mission.

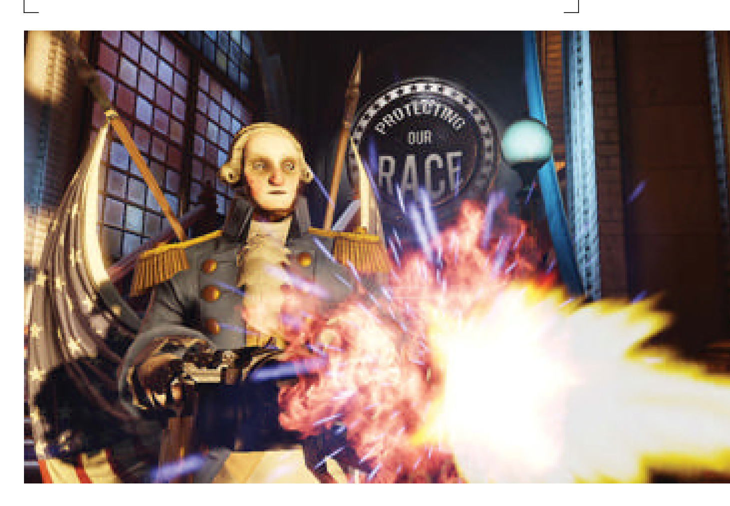
For all its fascinating architecture and retro scientific splendour, though, the most fascinating thing about Columbia is the space/time rupture that wracks it. Elements of future and past have found their way into the early 20th Century setting, creating all kinds of interesting possibilities on both thematic and gameplay levels.

If it can stick to its proposed February release – and we really hope it can – *BioShock Infinite* stands to be one of the games that gives 2013 the most explosive start to any year in recent memory. We're concerned it could still slip again, mind, although if we need to wait for Irrational to tighten the bolts to perfection, we're willing to drum our fingers a little longer.

TRIVIA

Infinite was in development at Irrational Games for a few years under the title 'Project Icarus' before the studio revealed it to be a *BioShock* sequel. None of the flashy attention-seeking promo work here.





Below: There's nothing quite so frightening as an animatronic proxy of an American president wielding heavy artillery and walking slowly towards you.





Inset: That makes six instalments in eight years for *God Of War* with *Ascension*. We're looking forward to it, but maybe give it a rest.

INFORMATION

Format: PS3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Sony Santa Monica
Release: March

GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION

An outing too far for Kratos?

BACK STORY

Game director Todd Papy previously worked on the first two entries of *God Of War* as a designer, before becoming design director on the third instalment.

God Of War: Ascension's greatest challenge will be proving that the series still has something new to say. With a slightly truncated single-player in comparison to previous titles and the sceptically received addition of multiplayer, Sony Santa Monica's prequel is a very safe bet for a high-selling exclusive PS3 title late on in the console's lifespan. But despite an overall lack of reinvention, which would no doubt be saved for the next-generation debut of Kratos, the more fluid approach to action in this instalment should sustain interest in the series for devotees.

Grabbing the weapons of enemies and being able to switch them with Kratos' own arsenal, mid-combo, is the kind of mechanically advanced touch that *God Of War* has long required to become a competitive, deeper hack-and-slash experience, which the franchise could use considering the fact that it shares the same release window as the promising *DmC Devil May Cry* and *Metal Gear Rising*.

What *Ascension* represents beyond savvy franchising and giving PlayStation owners exactly what they expect, however, will be representing the PS3 at the peak of its powers. Everything we've seen so far in terms of visual effects demonstrates that the console hasn't quite hit the ceiling yet. While it may feel conceptually superfluous, given the extent to which Kratos' story was offered closure with *God Of War III*'s climax, even the slighter PSP side tales show that the revered series is still far from irrelevance.

Right: Could this be the 360's final significant exclusive before a next-gen announcement?



GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

A hardcore swansong to Gears on the 360

After the commercial disappointment of *Bulletstorm*, People Can Fly's experimental approach to shooter design seems an ideal match for a series that could use a left-field interpretation in refreshing its fundamentals. *Gears Of War: Judgment* aims to take away the predictability of combat scenarios that we started to feel with the second and third games, while innovating in new multiplayer options and creating an unpredictable urgency in the way firefights play out.

That comes from escalating difficulty with the latest *Gears Of War* game. Acknowledging that people were getting a little too used to blowing through Locusts on casually tweaked settings, Epic and People Can Fly took inspiration from *Dark Souls* in seeing the way that users respond positively to a credible challenge. That will result in fewer scripted set pieces in *Judgment*, with randomly generated enemies that put the game much more in the ballpark of the original *Gears*, from a time when developers were less conscious about tailoring accessibility to a wider market.

And why not? At this point in the generation, you're either invested in *Gears* or you're not – and that subset of hardcore fans is likely to feel validated by a spin-off that is built especially for them, a far more appropriate route for the property than the scrapped Kinect project, *Gears Of War: Exile*. It seems that Epic is now totally clear on what a *Gears* title has to be, and *Judgment* may well be the purest expression of that.

INFORMATION

Format: 360
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: People Can Fly
Release: March

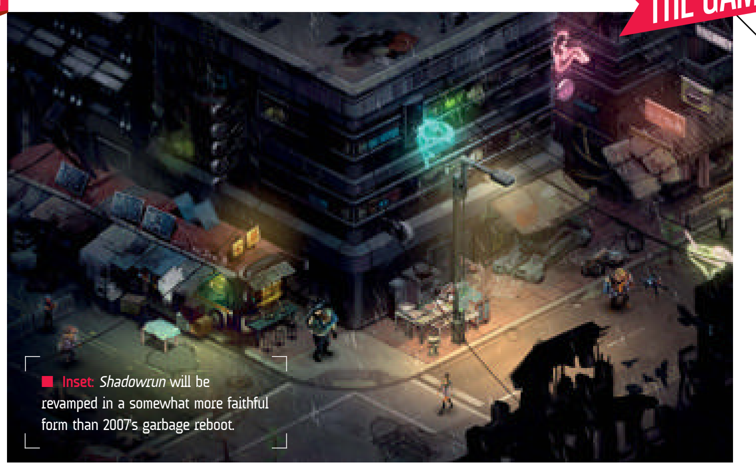
THE LAST GUARDIAN

INFORMATION
Format: PS3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Team Ico
Release: TBA

Ueda's difficult masterpiece is still in limbo

This isn't the first appearance of *The Last Guardian* in a games™ yearly preview – and we're still not convinced it'll get here in 2013, either. Fumito Ueda's likely final title for Sony was spending the summer undergoing a bit of a technical revamp to get it playable, last time we heard, while Sony's Shuhei Yoshida reconfirmed that the game is headed to the PS3. Such a nightmarish, prolonged birth is a real shame considering what a creative asset Team Ico has been to the PlayStation brand across its past two releases. While we're still sure that *The Last Guardian* will see the light of day, as we reach the drop-off point for the current gen, its continued absence is a little bit sad, really. Worth noting: *Shadow Of The Colossus* was released over seven years ago. That's how long the development cycle has gone on. Don't expect to hear about *The Last Guardian* again until E3 at the very earliest.

Above: It would be one of the great disappointments of the generation if *The Last Guardian* never saw release.



Inset: *Shadowrun* will be revamped in a somewhat more faithful form than 2007's garbage reboot.

SHADOWRUN RETURNS

By the people, for the people

INFORMATION Format: PC, Tablet **Publisher:** Harebrained Schemes **Developer:** In-house **Release:** January

Targeting a high-end art style for a title that could be a fine successor to the SNES and Mega Drive *Shadowrun* games, the crowdfunded *Shadowrun Returns* has all the hallmarks of a high-end passion project.

Featuring 2D environments hybridised with 3D character models, the art direction vaguely recalls the beautiful *Rayman Origins* in the way it's created, with an equally impressive design consistency across the two. The through line between *Returns* and earlier versions of the isometric RPG is clearly there, and the overspend of backers on Kickstarter has helped forge a more ambitious title than Harebrained Schemes originally had in mind – character customisation so far sounds like it'll benefit the most from that, with options due to grow in the game's post-release period.

Within interactive entertainment, Kickstarter has so far proved to be a love letter to bygone PC trends, providing several with an outlet for creation that they might not have had. We look forward to taking *Shadowrun Returns* through the nostalgia test.



INFORMATION Format: 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher:** THQ **Developer:** 4A Games **Release:** March

METRO: LAST LIGHT

A hint at what's to come for next-gen consoles

If *Metro 2033* encompassed a range of intriguing but half-explored ideas, *Metro: Last Light* is the follow-up that'll employ them more successfully, with accomplished survivor horror/ FPS setpieces enhanced by the game's quite extraordinary visuals and exponentially improved animations. The original struggled for consistency in terms of its structure, despite 4A Games' aptitude with environmental storytelling and atmosphere, while certain ideas didn't quite pay off, such as the bullet-based economy. But there's no denying the enormous potential of that post-nuclear war Russian setting, where the world outside has essentially transformed into *The Road*. *Last Light* offers a complete interpretation of that universe, and with a quite remarkable experience for PC users, it has every chance of surpassing the original.

TRIVIA
Parts of the Moscow Metro genuinely were designed to be used as nuclear fallout shelters during the Cold War, built to unusual depths and with heavy doors and life-support systems.







■ Above: Multiplayer is confirmed to be local only. Fine by us, since we can't see the game lending itself well to online showdowns anyway. Below: Miyamoto teased at E3 that Olimar and Louie will appear in the game, but he didn't specify in what capacity. A tenner says it's the new quartet's job to go rescue them.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house
Release: 2013
Players: 1-4

Console Strategy Profile

It's long been the case that the genre needed the precision of a mouse and keyboard, and only recently have devs started to tailor console RTSs around the inputs. *Pikmin* proves that it can work if the game is designed around a controller.

Console Strategy History

The Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-earth II
2006 [Multi]

Pikmin 2
2004 [GameCube]

Cannon Fodder
1993 [Multi]

Dune II: Battle For Arrakis
1992 [Multi]

High Point

EA's teams have been doing this for years. In terms of traditional RTS, the likes of *Red Alert 3* and *Battle For Middle-earth II* are hard to beat.

PIKMIN 3

CONCEPT ■ The cute cult RTS gets repotted, the unique nature of the platform a perfect fit.

Listen to what the flower people say

At a time in the Wii U's life when most third-party titles are content in trying to convince early adopters that they've been sold a current-gen console with a touch screen mini-map, it falls to Nintendo to explain what its new hardware could and should be doing. It's long been the way, to be fair – external teams took a while to figure out how best to use the curious GameCube controller, the Wii and DS launch windows were loaded with shaky third-party proof-of-concept demos carrying full price tags, and few outside the parent company have managed to coax the 3DS into being more than just a portable migraine. And so, once again, the Japanese firm has come out with something a little quirky, and it needs a game to show the world what its grand plan is.

Pikmin 3 is not that game.

That's not to say it won't be excellent, or that it doesn't take advantage of the enhanced power of the hardware, mind, because it most likely will and certainly does respectively. There's just little on display that taps into the Wii U's added functionality, a concern backed up by the fact that Nintendo seems happy to let players simply use the tried and

tested Wii control scheme for the game. The GamePad still comes into play and can be used as an input device all of its own, but it's already growing difficult to see a map on that additional screen without groaning.

That said, there's a little more to it in this instance, thankfully. Olimar and Louie have seemingly retired, leaving four new playable characters who can be switched between at will. The dual-character setup was one of *Pikmin 2*'s most notable improvements over the original, allowing for tactical groupings in line with more traditional real-time strategy, and doubling the character count again can only add more depth. In order to stop it becoming too simple, Nintendo is adding in new types of Pikmin to ensure players can't just fall back on kitting their characters out with colour-coded botanical battalions. We've already seen two new types – the extra-heavy Rock Pikmin and a new Magenta type, which can fly with the aid of their adorable little wings – but there will likely be a few surprises in the full game. Interestingly, *Pikmin 2*'s plump Purples and skinny Whites haven't sprouted yet, though Nintendo has reassured us that they're in there somewhere.

/// And as much as we'd really like to see some of the ideas showcased in *Nintendo Land* implemented to really sell the game and hardware in tandem, there's a lot to be said for simply seeing this gorgeous little world in HD for the first time. Nintendo does such a good job with artistic workarounds to technical shortfalls that it's easy to forget that we've not really seen what much of its core line-up would look like on a decent HDTV, but from its warming summer's day lighting to the intricate detail, *Pikmin 3* is just beautiful. Those little flower dudes are that much more endearing with this level of detail, your makeshift party now brimming with character, which only makes it harder to bear when they get gobbled up, squished, drowned or scorched, but you've only got yourself to blame if that happens. You're the one giving the orders. They're just plants with eyes.

As much as we love *Pikmin* – and we really do – this still feels like an uncharacteristically risky play by Nintendo. Outside of *Doshin The Giant*, *Pikmin* is possibly its least commercial IP, and right now it needs a big game that can make people understand what the Wii U is all about. It needs a *Zelda* where play alternates between multiple screens and input devices. It needs a *Metroid Prime* with fully functional AR scanning. But what it has in *Pikmin 3* is a delightful flowery strategy game that sadly takes little advantage of the Wii U's most interesting features. Here's hoping Nintendo has only scraped the topsoil with what it has shown so far…

> "It's already growing difficult to see a map on that additional screen without groaning"

Below: From the picturesque landscapes to the weird and wonderful critters that inhabit them, *Pikmin* in HD is everything we hoped it would be.



DIG DEEPER

SURE, IT might look like more of the same. And it mostly is, although a host of improvements and additions make *Pikmin 3* feel slicker than the last two games. New types and grouping options add strategic depth, while new abilities like the dodge roll go some way towards getting rid of the crushingly inevitable fatalities from previous games. There's greater depth to the combat itself, too, through the addition of weak spots on larger foes, plus layered approaches where different kinds of Pikmin will work better at different stages of the battle. There are even structural tweaks for the better – the end of each in-game day is celebrated with a replay of your antics, hopefully offering a better idea of the surroundings and possible strategies without the pressure of a ticking clock.





Left: If we come across as overly negative, it's only because both franchise and genre have tons of elements that the Wii U's tech could enhance and improve. It's still awesome; we'd just like to see more innovation here.

THE FUTURE IS HERE



■ Inset: Ubisoft is said to have addressed many of the concerns from fans, reinstating stealth elements into the game after the dismal E3 showing.

TRIVIA
Husky go-to Hollywood ball-buster Michael Ironside has been dropped as the voice of Sam Fisher in favour of a new performance capture artist. We hope the new boy has been gargling gravel.

INFORMATION
Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: In-house
Release: Early 2013

SPLINTER CELL BLACKLIST

Out with the new and in with the old

Ubisoft has struggled to sustain an identifiable approach to its rugged Third Echelon agent. Sam Fisher has gone Bourne, Bond, Bauer and every double-hard B in between as he leaps from one *Splinter Cell* entry to the next. Ubisoft is looking a little closer to home for influence for *Blacklist*, as a middle-aged Fisher heads back into the field with a host of new abilities that'll sound familiar to fans of Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* saga, while further distancing itself from its stealth-based roots. Refinement to executions, a stronger emphasis on *Conviction*'s 'Mark and Execute' mechanic, and the ability to climb walls are all integral to Ubisoft's latest attempt to rebrand Fisher, and while they don't all hit the mark, there's a strong energy on display. Here's hoping that Ubisoft has discovered a winning formula.



INFORMATION **Format:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Publisher:** Konami **Developer:** Platinum Games **Release:** February

METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE

A new slice of Metal Gear action

Platinum Games has a busy 12 months ahead, with both *Bayonetta 2* and *The Wonderful 101* slated for the Wii U later in the year. But before Nintendo locks the developer away in a floating barge, Platinum has loaned its inimitable touch to Kojima Productions, tasked with reinventing *Metal Gear*'s most derided hero and transforming him into a cybernetic badass. The gameplay excels in doing this; Raiden's move set is a deadly onslaught of delicate sword swipes grafted to the right analogue stick, potentially diminishing foes into fragments of their former being. It's a precise but surprisingly accessible move set, one that'll imbue a sense of empowerment in the player almost immediately. *Revengeance*'s 'Zan-Datsu' foundations outline Platinum's outrageous approach to *Metal Gear*, while remaining reverent to both the sensibilities of the studio and the hallowed property. Kojima would be wise to take note.

THE WONDERFUL 101

Platinum's other Wii U exclusive

INFORMATION **Format:** Wii U **Publisher:** Nintendo
Developer: Platinum Games **Release:** Early 2013

Imagine if Atsushi Inaba had produced *Pikmin* instead of Shigeru Miyamoto. Actually, you needn't bother. Just take a gander at Platinum Games' colourful Wii U debut, *The Wonderful 101*, and you'll know what we're talking about. Utilising the Wii U GamePad, players command an elite squad of misfit superheroes against an alien threat, using the Wii U's innovative controller to combine superpowers and unleash several powerful team attacks. Whether that's manifesting a giant fist, a huge sword or a gelatinous flan to smother an enemy, it's hard to think of a more eccentric arsenal at a player's disposal. It's an appealing premise, but, like much of the Wii U line-up, it's not the jaw-dropping spectacle we were anticipating. The next collaboration between Platinum and Nintendo is *Bayonetta 2*, so perhaps the best is yet to come.



■ Above: Ironically, the clockwork-style visuals closely resemble the *Pikmin* portion of Nintendo's launch title *Nintendo Land*. We're expecting better things from Platinum.

INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** Dontnod Entertainment **Release:** May 2013

REMEMBER ME

As if you had forgotten

It's a project that has been floating around in development hell for a number of years. *Remember Me* has undergone a few changes in that time, not least the switch from a compact open world setting into a linear, chapter-based campaign. The player controls Nilin, an amnesiac 'memory hunter' in a *Blade Runner*-esque vision of Paris 2084, who infiltrates her enemies' minds and tinkers with key memories to coerce future actions. Much of the combat pivots around this concept, with a range of future tech designed to scramble brainwaves without fatally wounding an enemy, while a robust melee-based customisable combo system features 50,000 variations for players to craft into four-tier chains. With Ubisoft's *Watch Dogs* sharing similar ominous themes of surveillance and oppression in the digital age, the less experienced indie outfit Dontnod will have its work cut out competing with the developer playing on home turf.



Inset: Platforms have yet to be confirmed for the game, pretty much confirming it'll be a next-gen release.

TRIVIA

LucasArts confirmed that the protagonist in the trailer is a placeholder, leading fans to believe that Boba Fett is the true star of the game. Rather him that some whining little man-child again.

STAR WARS 1313

Now a Mickey Mouse operation

INFORMATION **Format:** TBC **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** LucasArts **Release:** Late 2013

Everyone is talking about *Star Wars* right now. Everyone except LucasArts. Whether the studio is keeping schtum due to the widely publicised Disney/Lucasfilm buyout, or because of a planned bigger reveal further down the line, little else is known about *Star Wars 1313* other than the gameplay snippets released around E3 2012. Such furtive behaviour from LucasArts certainly gives stock to the incessant rumours of a next-gen platform release, but there's also a possibility of some behind-closed-doors tinkering to capitalise on the recent announcement of *Star Wars Episode VII* – especially given Lucasfilm's special effects, animation and sound departments are all collaborating on the ambitious videogame project. Whatever the case, buzzwords such as 'dark', 'gritty' and 'mature' will come as slight reassurance to fans that the game is at least trying to do something different with the franchise, which hasn't been the case for a long, long time.



INFORMATION **Format:** PC **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** The Creative Assembly **Release:** October 2013

TOTAL WAR: ROME II

Empire state of mind

Much like the Roman Empire, Creative Assembly understands that success relies on expansion. The long-awaited sequel to *Total War: Rome* will feature a much larger campaign map, enabling skirmishes to transition from sea to land while depicting a more brutal time of warfare. But Creative Assembly is also eyeing up the political and personal decisions that shaped an empire, expanding on *Shogun 2*'s decision path mechanic that'll form the backbone of the campaign, as key moments determine whether the Roman Republic transforms into an Empire. There's a wealth of other major enhancements and improvements, no doubt making *Rome II* the RTS to beat in 2013 and reaffirming the *Total War* franchise as the stern ruler of the genre.



CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2

Wait, aren't vampires supposed to sparkle?

So it's pretty much impossible to explain why *Lords Of Shadow 2* has the potential to be so awesome without entirely spoiling the original game. If you haven't played it – and you totally should – then get out of here, lest you read something you don't want to. Go on, scram. Gone? Or don't care, maybe? Okay, good. So Gabriel is Dracula now. But what does this well signposted yet still entirely spoilerific revelation mean in terms of gameplay? Everything, that's what.

As hinted at by the early footage, Gabriel will now have access to the Dark Lord's personal arsenal. Need something doing? Summon a bunch of bats and it's as good as done. Need someone killing? Summon a bunch of bats and they're as good as dead. Need to get to a faraway platform which is frustratingly beyond your jumping capabilities? Summon a bunch of bats and… no, wait, you probably just have to come back once you unlock the double jump or something. There'll be other non-bat-related powers too, so worry not – crazy energy blasts, teleportation, awful dialogue… Nothing is beyond the Vampire Lord's capabilities, if previous *Castlevania* games are any kind of barometer.

Which means it all comes down to just how much power MercurySteam decides to place in the hands of the player. We're sure demonic privileges will be rationed, but the very idea of an action game at least on par with the original, enhanced by all kinds of unholy badness makes us go a bit tingly. There's also the possibility that the team could explore inner conflict and set in place some kind of good-versus-evil mechanic – Gabriel was no bad egg, but who is to say what this kind of power could do to even the purest of hearts?

In any case, ultimate power could be fun. Why not let us loose with hellishly overpowered combos on crowds of hundreds of hapless mortal victims? Why not let us dive into some kind of vampire-based *Dynasty Warriors* fan fiction in the name of spectacle? While worlds away from the tight, *DMC*-inspired combat of the original, this kind of grand-scale combat would give the game an edge that its predecessor never had.

And it's that kind of hook that it's going to need to make a dent in the market. The original did fairly well, but a sequel will need to appeal to new players as well as returning ones to be in any way profitable – not to mention memorable – in a field where *Revengeance* is imminent, *DmC* is out, and *God Of War* and *Bayonetta* are poised to reclaim their respective holds on the genre. It's not going to be easy, but MercurySteam must know the uphill struggle that awaits it. We're both amazed and delighted that *Lords Of Shadow* is even getting a sequel, so best of luck to the team with the alchemical science that is turning quality into money next time.

INFORMATION

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
Release: Late 2013

> "Castlevania: Lords of Shadow successfully rebooted the franchise but now we want to go further"
> DAVE COX, MERCURYSTEAM

Below: By the time you read this, you may seen the VGA Awards reveal, which we can't talk about just yet.

TRIVIA

MercurySteam has confirmed that the conclusion of the 3DS spin-off game, *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow - Mirror Of Fate*, will directly set-up the events of the console sequel, acting as a prologue.



TRIVIA

Many of EA Games' internal projects have adopted DICE's gorgeous Frostbite 2 engine, including *Need For Speed*, *Medal Of Honor* and *Army Of Two*. We expect absolutely stunning things with this.

BATTLEFIELD 4

Waging war on the next-gen?

INFORMATION **Format:** Xxx **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** DICE **Release:** November 2013

Unceremoniously revealed to be coming sooner than expected by *Medal Of Honor: Warfighter* hawking the upcoming beta, *Battlefield 4* may lead older fans to bemoan it falling into the cyclical annual releases of its closest rival. But DICE is the very best at its particular brand of multiplayer, and we expect it to improve on its current-gen debut with any sequel, no matter how closely it follows its predecessor.

Details are scarce, no doubt in service of a reveal trailer next year, but there are obvious areas of improvement for DICE to focus on. Binning the single and co-op campaigns is a must, and upping the player count on current-generation consoles would be nice as well.

It is the thought of seeing what DICE can do on next-gen hardware, however, that has us most excited. *BF3* was an amazing feat given the hardware, and we're looking forward to seeing what DICE can do with open warfare on the new machines. (Hint: it'll be awesome-looking at the very least.)



DEADPOOL

The merc with a mouth gets gobby

INFORMATION **Format:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** High Moon Studios **Release:** TBA 2013

Ah, Deadpool. Generally relegated in other mediums to either the role of sidekick, being played by Ryan Reynolds in terrible films or both, he's now got his own game to show us exactly what he can do. Which, judging by what we've seen so far, is being Dante in a gimp suit with an attitude to women that makes even *Hitman: Absolution* blush. Oh look! Boobs! Hur Hur Hur!

Our reservations about the character aside – he's a superhuman, super-scarred, mercenary – High Moon Studios has a reputation for turning out engaging titles based on properties from other media, and so we're hoping that *Deadpool* can live up to the developer's work on the *Transformers* series. The combat system is obviously key to whether this goal is achieved; Deadpool is a master of many forms of martial arts, and combining those with swords and gunplay isn't the easiest job in the world. That said, this could be a lot of fun. There's a long back story to build on, and *Deadpool*'s fourth-wall-breaking attitude could provide some interesting scenarios.



■ Below: These may be bullshots, but there's no denying *Grid*'s fidelity. Expect the PC version to look at least this good.

TRIVIA

The game has been in development at Codemasters for several years, originally announced back in 2010 and expected to release the following year. With this much of a wait, we're expecting a lot.

INFORMATION

Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: In-house
Release: Early 2013

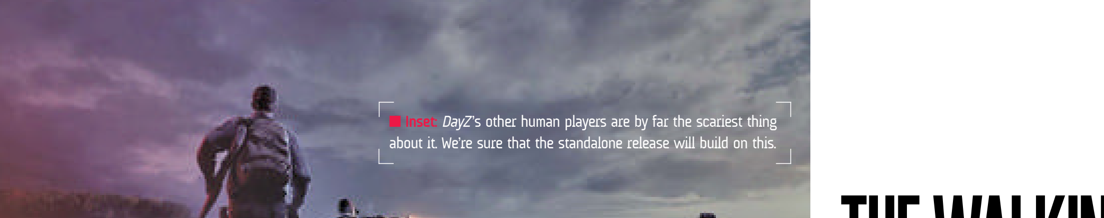
GRID 2

On 2013's starting line

The sequel to one of the most well-regarded racing titles of this generation, *Grid 2* has a lot to live up to when it makes its bow next year. Thankfully, it's already looking good.

Grid was no slouch in the graphics department, but Codemasters' Ego 3.0 engine is working on overdrive here. This artificially elongated generation may frustrate those looking for the thrill of new hardware, but there's no denying that it has led to developers wringing every last drop from what we've already got. From the steel and glass empire of Chicago to the dense treelines and vertiginous cliffs of the California coast, *Grid 2* looks beautiful.

It's the gameplay element that keeps players interested, however. Codemasters is promising to build on the impressive AI and handling, renowned for its nice arcade/sim balance, from the previous game to create what it optimistically calls 'Total Race Day Immersion'.





Inset: *DayZ*'s other human players are by far the scariest thing about it. We're sure that the standalone release will build on this.

DAYZ STANDALONE

Plenty of brains

INFORMATION Format: PC **Publisher:** Independent **Developer:** Dean Hall **Release:** 2012/2013

After giving PC players The Fear via a combination of survival-based open-world zombie apocalypse and even more dangerous player-controlled bandits, *DayZ* creator Dean Hall wants to give players the ultimate terror: uncontrollable bowel movements. Yes, the upcoming standalone *DayZ* may include the ability for players to become infected and then, well, defecate. Which could then infect other players. Response from the community was mixed, but Hall has stated that he wants to take risks in design, to see what works and what doesn't. According to Hall, *Minecraft* has been a huge inspiration in terms of both UI and controls, and other changes include MMO-style servers, new clothing items, new animations, and weapons now being world entities, allowing for customisation and degradation. A 'foundation release' is out this year, but expect Hall and co to build on that in 2013.

THE WALKING DEAD: SURVIVAL INSTINCT

The dead just keep on coming

INFORMATION Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** Terminal Reality **Release:** TBA 2013

You've got to feel for developer Terminal Reality on this one. Unless *Survival Instinct* is very, very good, it'll forever be known as the Activision-funded little brother to Telltale's excellent, emotion-baiting graphic adventures.

If it is good, however, it could be excellent. *Left 4 Dead* and *ZombiU* are the current kings of zombie FPSs, but if *Survival Instinct* can make good on its promise to focus on both shooting *and* scavenging, it could be a contender. That it also ties in to the TV show hardly hurts; as crossbow-toting Daryl, you'll have to make your way to Atlanta, dodging zombies and human foes alike.



Below: We try not to be down on games when we don't have to be, because we love them. But sometimes....

INFORMATION
Format: PC, PS3, Xbox 360
Publisher: EA
Developer: Visceral Games
Release: March 2013

ARMY OF TWO: THE DEVIL'S CARTEL

Say bye-bye to bromance

Say what you want about *Army Of Two: The 40th Day*, with its tiger extinction, zebra-striped guns and infamously loose grasp of what mercenaries actually do, but at least it had a style. This sequel, on the other hand, developed by Visceral Games, looks like a project designed expressly to win the title of 'Most Depressingly Bland DudeBro Shooter 2013'.

It's just all so uninspired. The co-op 'characters' are called Alpha and Bravo – yes, actually A and B. Like a NES game. It's set in Mexico, but given the amount of brown on display it could well be the alternate dimension from *Quake*. And the shooting just looks deathly dull, which is something that an *Army Of Two* game should never be.



YOND: TWO SOULS

Forecasts predict more Heavy Rain

INFORMATION

Format: PlayStation 3
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Quantic Dream
Release: Late 2013

O **n seems to be torn when it comes to**
l Cage and his studio Quantic Dream's
t. To some, he's a visionary – one of
eople in the industry today pushing the
es of interactive fiction, one of the few
ough to take risks in a broken economy
of the few willing to invest millions in
g where the right trigger is more likely
someone open a letter than it is to fire
n. But to others, he's nothing more than
r, a guy with misguided ideals about
close cinema and videogames actually
e another. Some see *Heavy Rain* as
onal masterclass in how narrative and
ence should be handled in a modern
hers see nothing more in that game
gon's Lair wearing the Emperor's new
with a side order of 'Press X to Jason'.
how little middle ground there seems
erms of reception to previous Quantic
ames, *Beyond* is already faced with
an uphill struggle. The choir sure as hell
don't need preaching to – they've got
order slips to hand at all
ut the haters? Well, a
of a *Heavy Rain*-style
ompt to perform a basic
ll the fuel the need
he Hate Engine. So,
perhaps even essentially,
ees the studio cast the net
than it did with *Heavy Rain*,
n Hollywood talent to back up
the game's sleeve-worn cinematic credentials. So yeah, this is the PlayStation 3 exclusive that actually does have Ellen Page in it, as opposed to the one that just looked like it had Ellen Page in it, then later went back to the drawing board to come out with a redesigned female lead who looks marginally less like Ellen Page. We know, it's all very confusing.

On a cinematic level, it's hard to fault *Beyond*. Performance capture creates something so real that we'd be worried our PS3 was melting while playing it, putting the toys-with-human-heads look of *LA Noire* to shame. Even the slightest of squints at its actions sequences and you could easily be watching a movie, such is the standard of tech mastery at work here. And with bodies and environments just about matching up to faces, much of the uncanny valley aspect of Team Bondi's ambitious and groundbreaking retro crime romp is dissipated as well.

But what of the gameplay? Well, while some of what we've seen mirrors both *Heavy Rain* and *Fahrenheit* – QTE haters need not apply, basically – *Beyond* has some very interesting tricks up its sleeve. It's a study of protagonist Jodie Holmes and her odd relationship with the ghostly Aidan, an invisible supernatural guardian angel capable of interacting with the physical world. While in control of Aiden, you're in no-clip heaven, free to roam as you please before possessing other characters, messing with objects in the world and generally doing everything in your power to keep Jodie safe. QTEs ensue, sure, but at least this kind of free-roaming, almost point-and-click-style interaction with the world shows that David Cage and his crew have moved on from trying to simulate the act of opening a cupboard using a controller.

"A game design is the blueprint to build an emotional rollercoaster," explains the Quantic Dream boss. "A good rollercoaster is a journey that is truly unique. It will make you go through intense and varied emotions; it will shake you, scare you, give you a different point of view, something that will make you feel alive. It is built with solid materials, and every single detail, from screws to girders, supports the experience in a meaningful way. When you leave the rollercoaster, you realise you experienced a great moment – not necessarily a pleasant moment – but most of all, it is a ride you will remember for a long time. It is a unique memory, one of these moments that contributes to making you who you are, even if only in a subtle, minor way."

We push a little further, and Cage lets us into the inner sanctum. "Let me tell you the secret that took me 15 years to discover," he teases. "It is something very few people know, and even the few people who know it are sometimes not aware of it. The secret to great game design is to be sincere. Write about something personal, something unique, something you find incredibly valuable. Write about yourself. Write about your fears, your hopes, your world, your ideas. Write about what you believe in. Never write for others. If you are truly sincere, your work will instantly resonate with other people because they will feel you are genuine. Never write for money. Money will get you a nice car, but you won't make anything meaningful with your life."

TRIVIA

Heavy Rain Chronicles was set to be a series of DLC chapters to expand the story of Cage's last PS3 exclusive. Aside from the first entry, the project was put on indefinite hold due to other projects.

■ Above: Ellen Page finds time to relax on the *Beyond* mo-cap stage, while David Cage mounts a full-scale attack on her face with a blue felt-tip pen.

■ Above: While previous Quantic Dream games have explored some big issues in the past, *Beyond: Two Souls* represents the greatest challenge for David Cage and his team to date.

> "The secret to great game design is to be sincere. Write about something personal"
> DAVID CAGE, QUANTIC DREAM

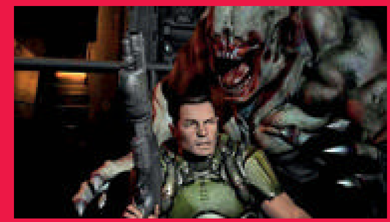


BEYOND 2013

PREY 2

Publisher: **Bethesda** Developer: **Human Head**

■ ALREADY BOASTING a back story more interesting than a lot of actual games released this year, *Prey 2*'s development has been clouded with rumours of cancellations and direction changes. We're glad it's not canned, as the thought of playing an amnesiac ET bounty hunter on a foreign planet rather appeals.



DOOM 4

Publisher: **Bethesda** Developer: **id Software**

■ THINGS WE know about *Doom 4*: it's happening, it's probably going to be out pretty soon, and there's a strong chance it will be more like *Doom* than *Doom 3*. Suggestions that it's set on Earth are interesting, as is the new scripting tech that Carmack is throwing behind it.



STARCRAFT II: LEGACY OF THE VOID

Publisher: **Blizzard** Developer: **In-house**

■ THE FINAL instalment in the *StarCraft II* single-player trilogy, this time focusing on the Protoss race. Seeing as the second, *StarCraft: Heart Of The Swarm*, isn't even out yet – due in March 2013 – this is still some way off.



DANTE MUST NOT DIE

Young Dante might have been taken into foster care by the lovely folks at Ninja Theory, but don't assume for a second that means his biological parents have severed all ties – Capcom remains interested and active in his upbringing all the same. We sit down for a game of Happy Families with the two developers to discuss a game that depicts anything but…

Never judge a book by its haircut. That's the well-meaning mixed metaphor of a lesson we'll be learning today. So grab your textbooks, open them to page 2010 and we'll… actually, screw that. Nobody needs a history lesson here. Game got announced, internet lit up, yadda yadda yadda. Unless you've been living under a rock for the last two years, you'll know that nu-Dante's appearance has been met with reactions best described as 'not entirely positive'. But we've long since hosed away most of that knee-jerk nonsense. Early hands-on with the game hinted at a far more familiar slab of demon-pasting than the smirking toerag of a redesigned protagonist let on. And now, having turned the majority of a near-final build into a cloud of S ranks and high fives, we can safely predict a bare minimum of tears.

You see, outside of the character redesign and the new UK home, this is very much classic *DMC*. Secret missions still test your creative carnage capabilities; combat still champions flawlessly executed combos and lightning-fast reactions over button-mashing tedium; switchable weapons and styles still offer the hardcore a vast toolset from which to draw in creating showreel exhibition videos. Hell, even the story doesn't deviate that far from Capcom's established origins and the 'what if…' questions raised by previous games, despite the parallel universe setting of this reboot.

"It was the best way to leverage the existing canon but not be hamstrung by it," explains Capcom USA producer Alex Jones, in discussing why in particular Ninja Theory decided that an origin story was the way to handle the project. "It would be very difficult for a Western company to tell the fifth instalment of a Japanese story. You don't want to throw away all the equity that people have built up, so that was the way to go."

Even after the initial rounds of hands-on impressions had more or less laid to rest many of the original concerns about Ninja Theory's ability to re-create the technical action on which the franchise is based, though, the trolls that live under the internet still managed to find new bugbears to court. Chief among these was Ninja Theory's precedent for putting story before gameplay – a valid concern in addressing the new entry in one of the most action-packed franchises gaming has to offer but not one that deserves to have any sleep lost over it, least of all without any direct experience of the product in question. Yes, there's probably slightly more in the way of narrative exposition and cut-scenes than the series has had before – as is to be expected in an origin story, to be fair – but it's still Billy Gameplay whose name tops the bill.

"Actually, I feel story *is* important," argues Capcom Japan's supervising director Hideaki Itsuno when asked if Ninja Theory is perhaps misplacing the game's emphasis compared to previous games in the series. "I was involved with the stories in previous *Devil May Cry* games and I think maybe it's just the direction of the story that is different. With previous *DMC* stories, I'd compare them more to French film, where there are a lot of indirect things. Not everything is said. That's very similar to Japanese culture. But with this new game, we're going for Hollywood – straight, direct, in-your-face style. And that goes for the storytelling as well."

But fear not, brave Dante Must Die SSS seeker. This small helping of extra narrative won't come at the cost of your ability to bust out combos that send all who see you play into fits of rapturous applause.

As brilliant as several of the games may have been – no, *DMC2*, it's not the end of recorded time yet, so you can't come off the naughty step – it wouldn't be difficult to argue that none had quite got the balance right yet between making the action flashy and making endgame hardcore combos something more than three people in the entire world could pull off successfully. *DMC3*'s pre-selectable styles forced players into choosing which flavour of flashy to dine upon, while giving Dante all of these at once in the fourth game was frankly overwhelming, especially after having to play the first half of the game as Nero – a guy who managed to beat Ezio to the punch in making even the slightest interaction with the controller look all kinds of awesome.

"I don't know if we would have found anyone else. Certainly no one who does it as well as Ninja Theory"

But Ninja Theory's celebration of Dante's dual angelic/demonic parentage offers the studio an opportunity to find a middle ground and boy, does it ever run with it. Regular attacks play out in a fashion even the most casual *DMC* player will find familiar, but the trigger buttons are the key to unlocking *Devil May Cry*'s most user-friendly and deep combo system to date. The attack buttons on their own loose Dante's trademark Rebellion attacks and combos, while the left and right triggers now

■ SSS rankings aren't too hard to get. They certainly seem easier than they were in, say, *DMC3*, at least.



Difficulty levels have been reworked slightly, though harrowing top-end challenges like Dante Must Die and Heaven And Hell mode return and are brutal as ever.

serve as modifiers that dynamically unleash angelic and demonic blows respectively on the fly. While a little daunting at first, it isn't long before you're combining all three into SSSensational combos, and the extra functionality of each discipline gives near-limitless potential, especially once you start employing the dual whip attacks, which can draw enemies towards Dante, stripping them of shields and other such nuisances, or send him flying towards them to continue a glorious string of punishment, a little like Nero's Devil Bringer arm but without the associated feeling of having your oversized, crimson-glowing hand held the whole time.

For ultimate kudos, switch weapons on the fly. Launch a juggled enemy higher with the angelic scythe, for instance, then a tap of the appropriate direction on the D-pad will switch to the holy glaives to keep them in the air for the rest of their afterlives. It's a beautifully well-realised system, making regular combos look awesome and off-menu beatdowns the kind of thing you could easily lose a YouTube evening to.

And Capcom was never going to sit back and let the combat take a back seat. "We're very, very involved with the whole process," Capcom Japan producer Motohide Eshiro assures us. "Our methodology, our policy if you will, was to have Ninja Theory come to us with their initial ideas and concepts. We saw our job as being kind of shepherds, in helping to usher along the core idea to a place where, control-wise, we were very satisfied and it felt very much like a *Devil May Cry* game." To this end, Dante's Japanese parent paid more than a few visits to his Cambridge foster home. "We brought out with us not just Itsuno-san but also the lead animator for *DMC3* and *DMC4*. He would get up and do poses and give really specific advice on the detailed stuff, like how it feels the instant your weapon connects with an enemy. Things you might not think from the outside are deliberately designed but, I assure you, it's very deliberately designed. So we'd give all this feedback so they'd act on that and bring it back, then Itsuno-san and the others would get the controller in their hand and give further feedback. So we were very, very deeply involved throughout the whole process."

But this insistence on Capcom retaining custody of its child raises a question of its own: why go to Ninja Theory in the first place, then? "This time, we wanted to avoid the problem that befalls some series where you keep making it with the same team and the same hardware," Itsuno explains. "It tends to decrease and fans move away from it, and we wanted to avoid that. We don't want the series to die. So what we decided to do was to add new elements and look for a new developer. Specifically a Western developer that could bring something new to the series, keep it fresh and maybe attract new fans as well."

"We wanted to avoid the problem that befalls some series where you keep making it with the same team and the same hardware"

But what, specifically, about Ninja Theory was it that attracted Capcom's eye? We have to admit to being as sceptical as anyone about the team behind *Heavenly Sword* being offered the keys to so revered a franchise, so did Capcom Japan perhaps see something in *Enslaved* that made it think the UK team had the skills to pull this off? "Actually, we started on the collaboration before *Enslaved* was released," reveals Itsuno. "But seeing that as it was being made and talking with them – and seeing that they had already collaborated with a Japanese developer – was one aspect of it. And actually, looking at *Heavenly Sword* and how it's a similar action game with a 3D environment and seeing that Ninja Theory had the skills and talent to do the kind of things that we wanted to do, that was a big factor in making our decision."

Having enjoyed the new game to the point where our mouths are too caked in humble pie to continue this line of questioning, we decide to change tack. What if Ninja Theory had elected to ignore commercial viability and continue the *Enslaved* odyssey, or started work on *Heavenly Sword 2* for the three people who actually care, and had therefore been too busy to take on the project? "I'm not sure what we would have done if Ninja Theory wasn't available. We didn't have a backup plan, to be honest with you. We might not have done the title at all!" laughs Eshiro, though we're not sure this is a laughing matter – the idea that the glorious thing we've been enjoying

Want new weapon skins? You'll be glad to hear that you can add more colour to your arsenal via DLC, you weirdo.



Anatomy of an antihero

Breaking down the half-demon bad boy

Hair

MOVING AWAY from Dante's traditional silver barnet was a bold move but one that both works in context and is explained by the narrative. Ninja Theory's expert handle on narrative doesn't detract from or replace the series' action focus, but cut-scenes and dialogue do carry more weight than they once could, w[illegible]erformances all round. A[illegible]eally do miss those flo[illegible]ng silver locks, fear not.

Ebony & Ivory

DANTE STARTS the new game without his signature sidearms. But after finding them dangling from a bra strap early on – yes, really – they are quickly re-established as an essential part of the arsenal. Outside of their obvious usefulness in extending combos at range, the multi-hit charge shot is particularly handy. Or at least it would be, were it not for the finger gymnastics required to hold a charge while performing a melee combo. Even mapping the guns to a shoulder button is less practical than it once was, considering the fire button now shares a bed with the grapple command.

Coat

NOT A fan of Dante's new look? Things could have been much worse. "The concepts that we ended up doing looked pretty much like fan art," reveals Antoniades. "There wasn't anything authentic about it. But that's what happens when you end up designing a costume rather than a character." Like the hair issue, in the context of the new game, Dante's new duds make perfect sense. Nobody is trying to replace the iconic vision of Dante that you cosplay terribly, nor are they trying to reinvent the wheel. But in an alternate universe and as a younger version of himself, it stands to reason that Dante should wear something less… well, ridiculous. If only slightly.

Rebellion

IT WOULD have been all too easy for a reboot to move away from many of Dante's established toys, though ditching his trademark sword would perhaps have been a step too far for even the most ambitious of teams. Rebellion returns, with many of the established combos and attacks still holding true, despite its younger wielder. Commands have been altered to fit the new controller layout, but most of the sword-based carnage you know and love is still possible. We'll miss Dance Macabre, though, it must be said.



The showdown with Raptor News host Bob Barbos is one of the best boss battles we've seen in recent years, both stylistically and mechanically.

might not have existed is enough to make us do a little cry. "The important thing to remember is there is Ninja Theory's expertise in story, but they are also very adept at action games. That was the other condition we set when looking for a partner. If we found another Western developer that was very cinematic in their storytelling and placed a lot of emphasis on that but didn't have the action chops, that wouldn't have worked. It really had to cover these two bases. And I don't know if we would have found anyone else. Certainly no one who does it as well as Ninja Theory does."

Still, it can't be easy having so many parties looking out for Dante. "It's terribly complicated and very difficult being in three different places," nods Eshiro. "Our policy was to try and meet face to face as often as possible and get on a plane when we needed to. We established a system where we meet face to face, play the latest build, give feedback, fly back, get the new build, write feedback down, bring it back here again a few months later and repeat the pattern."

But even that wouldn't be enough. Capcom's faith in Ninja Theory is one thing, but leaving anything to chance was never an option. "On top of that, Alex came out even more often than we all did together, handling the day-to-day management and making sure everything was on track," he tells us. "And then, of course, at Capcom Japan we have weekly vidcoms with Capcom USA so that we are making sure we're sharing all the information that needs to be shared. It's not an easy thing to do, but it's not impossible if you're willing to spend a lot of time on planes."

Dante lookalike and Ninja Theory stalwart Tameem Antoniades has been quiet until now, though he isn't shy in offering his thoughts on what Ninja Theory brings to the table. "Very early on, they asked us to imagine what Dante would look like if he was in a Hollywood movie," he recalls. "What they really mean by this is a non-Japanese interpretation. So we started to think about this quite literally. What would he actually look like in a movie? And that's when you start to see the stark differences between characters in videogames and movies and the stark differences between anime-based characters in videogames to Western movies." His words serve as more than just idle forum bait, too – while unfamiliar at first, the new Dante does still carry the adolescent scent of what we know the mature demon spawn would, could and should be.

"We really went deep," continues Antoniades. "We visited Japan, Osaka quite often, and made sure I went to a few rock gigs to see what the style of the bands are. Nothing exemplifies cool people more than rock stars. And you

Cut-scenes are surprisingly well acted, whether you think Dante comes across as a bit of a dick or not.



We really wish the gun wasn't mapped to the same button as the grapple. It makes setting up a control scheme that works well for both extremely tricky.

"We were charged with reinventing the world and the character, and they were in charge of ensuring we understood the philosophy of Devil May Cry"

see the stark difference between the more flamboyant, creative style in Japan versus the very downtrodden style [in] the West. I'm not sure where that kind of style set foot, but you can probably trace it back to Joy Division, the original band who underdressed and did everything they can to not appear to be cool."

Which, it must be said, seems to be the opposite approach to Ninja Theory's. For better or worse, the title oozes cool. "You've got to remember three years ago, when we were making decisions about this, dubstep wasn't the huge thing it is today," insists audio lead Tom Colvin, and the game's trademark dirty rock and wub-wub-heavy boss themes, courtesy of established noiseniks Combichrist and Noisia, do serve their purpose wonderfully. There's a certain degree of try-too-hard that comes across in many aspects of *DmC* when taken in isolation, to be fair, but one need look no further than the spectacle of Chapter 10's jaw-dropping boss battle against people's mouthpiece Bob Barbos for proof that this isn't just a shameless feat of bandwagon-commandeering. It's a brilliantly observed and expertly judged way of placing the fantastical in a culturally relevant and yet equally terrifying setting.

Antoniades steps up once more. "Whereas Capcom Japan gave us quite a lot of leeway on the story, setting and starting the franchise again, if you like, on the combat they were very hands-on," he reiterates. "Combat, enemies, bosses; they were very hands-on. They visit us maybe every six to eight weeks or so. They'd pore through every detail of combat and mechanics. That was kind of the division of responsibility, if you like. We were charged with reinventing the world and the character, and they were in charge of ensuring we understood the philosophy of *Devil May Cry* combat and effectively make a Japanese combat game within a Western story."

This clash of ideals is something that we're all but guaranteed to see more of going forward – revenue from a single territory is no longer enough to ensure profitability. But if our experience of *DmC* is anything to go by – or *Dead Rising 2* and *Lost Planet 3*, for that matter – we're comfortable in proclaiming it no bad thing. *Devil May Cry 4*, while decent, was a game that perfectly demonstrated how even the best templates can quickly grow tired. And Capcom, despite what internet funnymen may say about the firm based on its battery farm DLC policies, wasn't about to milk this cash cow any further without due cause.

"What was very clear was they didn't want to make *Devil May Cry 5*," Antoniades closes. "They didn't want to make something that looked like the previous four. They wanted a new entry point into the series with a different perspective, which is why they came to us."

THE GAMES

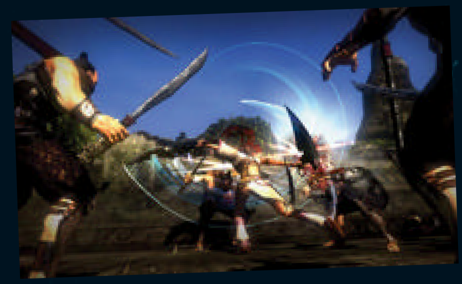
The secret ingredient

What exactly does Ninja Theory bring to Devil May Cry?



Humour (Kung Fu Chaos, 2003)

You needn't look further than *DMC3*'s exceptional opening sequence to see that despite its hardcore slant, this is not a series that takes itself overly seriously. Ninja Theory's softography shows that it isn't a studio that is scared to crack the odd joke and, sure enough, *DmC* is dripping with in-jokes, double entendre and wry pokes at both genre and franchise.



Creativity (Heavenly Sword, 2007)

Hailed as one of the first great PlayStation 3 exclusives, *Heavenly Sword* was always set up for a fall. Combat was fair but it was with creativity that Ninja Theory would leave its mark – nobody asked for Sixaxis-controlled projectiles, sure, but that's what we got. And to be fair, the rest of Nariko's arsenal was a cut above the usual 'mash X to win' level as well.



Narrative (Enslaved: Odyssey To The West, 2010)

A primary topic of concern for the *DMC* hardcore was that Ninja Theory would make a playable bedtime story about Dante the half-demon, but that hasn't happened. No, the same maturity evident in the studio's reworking of the classic *Journey To The West* tale is there in *DmC* as well, painting a bittersweet family portrait of Dante's unusual bloodline that demands further exploration.

The Game Changers of 2012

We speak to the most influential people of the past year to discuss their recent success and what they plan for the future

While television and music have experienced something of a renaissance, for better or for worse, in recent years with the internet and digital channels delivering mass media to all, revolutions in videogames turn around at a much greater pace. This is a young medium, after all; *Pong* only just turned 40 at the end of November, so there's still a certain spring in its stride going forward. 2012 brought the spotlight on developers old and new: Peter Molyneux and his new studio, 22Cans, took their strange experiment online and aroused perhaps far more Curiosity than expected, temporarily breaking the servers. He also launched the *Godus* Kickstarter, which, along with slew of other high-profile Kickstarter projects, including Tim Schafer's *Double Fine Adventure*, has been seeing a lot of attention this year, making Kickstarter a really viable source of independent funding. Dean 'Rocket' Hall went from development obscurity and man set on making a life for himself in the Special Forces to one of 2012's best-known names in videogames as *DayZ* rocked PC gaming. And Telltale Games, steadily growing over the last five years or so, hit the big time with its latest episodic series, *The Walking Dead*. We can safely reflect on the last 12 months and say, '2012? Ah, that was a vintage year.'

BEST COMEBACK

Peter Molyneux

HE'S ONE OF the biggest names in our industry and he's the first to admit that he's not infallible. He sometimes gets things wrong and he's prone to childlike bursts of enthusiasm, but he often gets things very, very right. Peter Molyneux has been responsible for some of the greatest games ever, and picking his brain for his thoughts on his 2012 shift from Lionhead Studios and *Fable: The Journey* to 22Cans, Curiosity and *Godus* is fascinating.

"When you wake up from a long hibernation sleep, whether you're a big, old grizzly bear or a developer like me, what do you do?" Peter Molyneux is referring, of course, to his springtime transition from Microsoft mega-studio Lionhead to indie startup 22Cans. "You tumble outside and take a rest or jump headlong into the stream that is indie development – and that's what I did and fortunately I got other people to do the same."

What with the crazy few weeks in October and November that new studio's experiment, *Curiosity*, has put Molyneux through, he's been on a bit of an emotional rollercoaster all year. Two weeks before his unannounced departure from Microsoft, we interviewed him, oblivious to the fact that he was about to go it alone. "It was a very bizarre time," he admits. "I owed it to Lionhead to do a good job of *Fable: The Journey*; I felt very caring about them, though I had my worries about it. But I did think, 'Oh, God! What if there's a question about what I'm going to be doing in the next month? I'm gonna have to lie!' That was difficult for me, and it was difficult not to hint that in two weeks I would be talking to you again, but not as part of Microsoft."

For Molyneux, though, he considers his first day of 2012 to have started with the start of working at 22Cans. "It started on 3 March by taking the long 280-step walk from my house to 22Cans. The first thing we did was to get a team together and then we said, 'What idea shall we work on?' So the experiments came out, the idea of experimenting with technology and game mechanics came out. Then as the team grew we started to implement *Curiosity*. Then it was released. Bizarrely, it was released when I was in Israel giving a talk, and when I got back, six hours later, it had been downloaded almost a quarter of a million times. All of our assumptions about how popular it would be were totally blown out of the water."

Curiosity was such an overwhelming success for 22Cans that servers couldn't handle the traffic.

"When you wake up from a long hibernation sleep, whether you're a big, old grizzly bear or a developer like me, what do you do?"

Year in Review

January

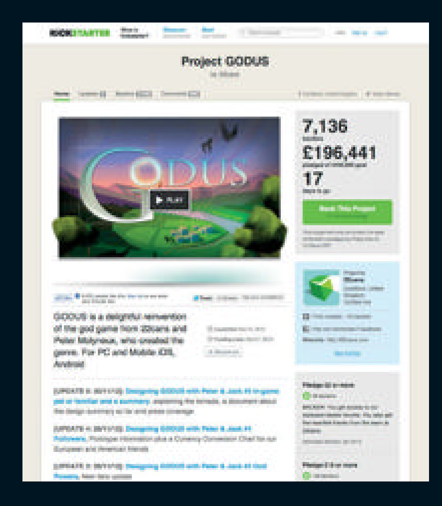
- *Star Wars: The Old Republic* reaches its highest number of concurrent users at any one time with 350,000 in total
- Bethesda gains full control of rights to *Fallout* games, more specifically enabling the creation of a *Fallout* MMO
- THQ is hit by financial troubles, laying off staff and cancelling many of its in-development projects

February

- Sony's PS Vita is released in the UK, selling 61,000 units here in its first week



- UK high street retailer Game is affected by financial troubles, facing a possible closure of the entire company
- Kaz Hirai is promoted to president and CEO of Sony Corporation, replacing Howard Stringer
- Double Fine makes history by pitching a new adventure game with Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert on Kickstarter



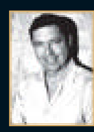


Project Eternity is just one of many games that Kickstarter is responsible for.

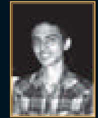
BEST INNOVATION Kickstarter

The games industry has never been in as much an upheaval as it is right now, with the rise of free-to-play, the resurgence of the bedroom developer, and the increasing popularity of digital games. Riding the crest of this new wave of videogames is crowdfunding, spurred into action by Double Fine, which, earlier this year, turned the industry on its head when it successfully funded a brand new point-and-click adventure from two of the most important names in the genre. Since then Kickstarter, currently the primary location for videogame crowdfunding, has gone on to witness several million-dollar projects receive funding, the rebirth of a handful of long-dead gaming genres, and even a console designed entirely around indie development. But is 2012 the year we witnessed a revolution in development, or will this just be a temporary stopgap until the next generation finally rolls around? We chat to Brian Fargo (*Wasteland 2*), Chris Avellone (*Project Eternity*), Mitch Gitelman (*Shadowrun Returns*) and Justin Ma (*FTL: Faster Than Light*) – four of the most prominent Kickstarter success stories – and ask them their thoughts on their achievement, and whether there's a future in crowdfunding for videogames.

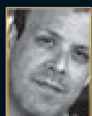
What has changed in the industry for Kickstarter to suddenly become so popular and viable as a source of funding, and what elements do you think helped make it become such a prominent part of the industry?



Brian Fargo: I think there are several dynamics at work that made Kickstarter the powerful game-changer that it is. One large element is the built-up frustration from players regarding the business practices – day one DLC, for example – of the publishers and of the lack of creative choice. Up until now there wasn't another vehicle in which the gamers could vote with their wallets to divert their dollars towards a different game experience. Digital distribution and crowdfunding removes both retail and the publisher from the gatekeeping process of what games are made. There have been so many times in the past in which you had a creator willing to make a game and a customer who wanted to buy that game but only to be stopped by the barriers of publishing and retail.



Justin Ma: I am not sure if this is directly related to rise of crowdfunding, but it does seem like middle-sized studios have been dying off in recent years. It feels like the only games that do significantly well in this environment are extremely high-budget triple-A titles that have a reliable audience. Large publishers are less and less likely to take risks, since the games require increasingly large investments. It is therefore difficult to get funding from publishers for quirky or 'risky' ideas, but that doesn't mean players aren't interested in those types of games. Many players see the Kickstarters as ways to voice their opinions; using money to say, 'I want games like this to exist.' It is also a great way for truly passionate developers to create their dream game regardless of perceived financial viability.



Mitch Gitelman: The big thing is that you're not dealing with business people with business agendas making business decisions. Kickstarter backers are not investors. They're believers, they're supporters, and they're fans. They want the project they back to succeed for their own individual reasons.

Then they want to follow the project's progress so that they can feel part of its development. It's altruistic, vicarious, and hopefully very rewarding. For this reason, social networking is a big part of it. We get passionate about a Kickstarter and we want to spread the news to help the project succeed. I follow several friends to see what projects they're backing and I know I have many friends who are following me.

Because of these things, you can see projects get funded and 'blow up big' rapidly from an outpouring of support. Those same projects might not get the time of day from a big publisher who can't take on the risk or for other logical business reasons.

Is there a future for crowdsourced games, and if so what do you think that future is?

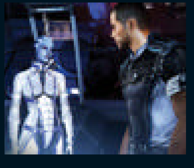
BF: I remember getting the question early on in my Wasteland Kickstarter campaign about the future viability of crowdfunding, and I had felt strongly that it was nothing less than a movement and fundamental shift of the games business. And here we are, six months later with multimillion-dollar projects successfully funded on a near-monthly. There are so many positives with no apparent end in sight. It also has people like myself backing projects we probably would not have purchased otherwise. Watching the passion of the developer behind the game and knowing how it can affect their lives has me funding more games than I would have normally bought.

Chris Avellone: Right now, I don't think there's

March

- Peter Molyneux quits Lionhead and Microsoft Studios to form 22Cans, focusing on smaller, indie projects

- *Mass Effect 3* is released to an internet outrage over the ending of the game. Later scenes are added to try and address this



- Brian Fargo's *Wasteland 2* project rides the success of Double Fine's Adventure, collecting $2.9 million

- Game is saved from bankruptcy after administrators close 277 stores and make over 2,000 employees redundant

April

- Notch announces his next game, sci-fi *Elite*-style space game *0x10c*, which will release after Mojang's *Scrolls*

- *Shadowrun Returns* continues the popularity of Kickstarter, with the project earning £1.8 million

- After issues surrounding its development, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* is revitalised as free-to-play MMORPG *Survarium*

- Valve's unique staff hierarchy is revealed via employee handbook, revealing that there are "no bosses"



currently a chance for a summer blockbuster-style game like *Call Of Duty* with the current Kickstarter funding level, but it's usually enough for more modest games that don't have a foothold – adventure games, old-school [isometric] RPGs. My hope, however, is that over time, we keep seeing those donations and game ambitions grow until the funding is entirely player-driven.

MG: Yes, there is absolutely a future for crowdsourced games. The game industry seems to be moving the way of the music industry. While the triple-A, big-budget, big-audience, big-risk days may be winding down, there are now more options for gamers than ever, and more opportunities for indies to find their audience. Crowdsourcing websites will likely become more specialised so that gamers can go to a crowdsourcing site that specialises in games.

A new business will likely emerge that manages crowdfunding projects for indies to gain maximum impact. People will find a way to 'corporatise' it, turn it into more of a machine, and make it more crass.

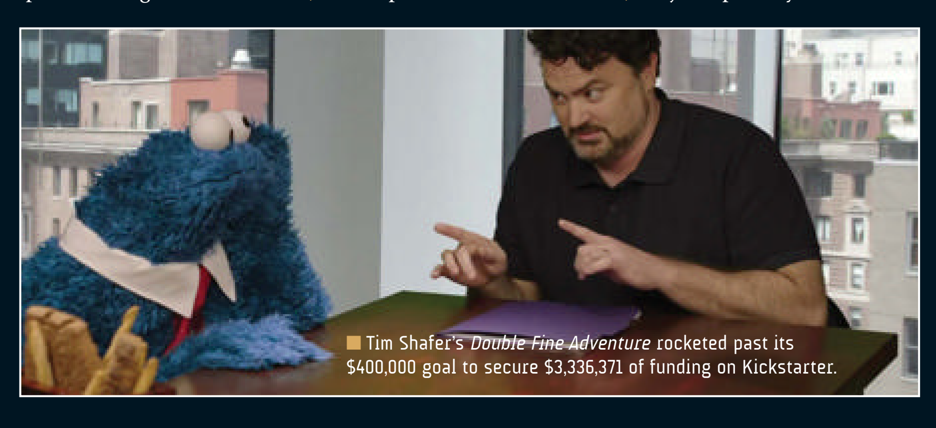
How do you think the popularity of crowdfunding has affected publishers and big-budget games?

BF: On one hand you have a group of publishers who don't seem to even notice this crowdsourced movement that is happening while others appear to be trying to take some lessons from it. I have had discussions with a few publishers recently who asked me what I had been up to, and I would naturally mention *Wasteland* and our Kickstarter success and they had never heard of it. I informed them that it was kind of big thing going on, but it just didn't seem to be something that was material. On the other hand, I do see publishers who are well aware and it appears that they are taking the communication with the gamers aspect to heart and trying to apply it to their development. The biggest short-term impact is that I believe they will start to REALLY listen to the gamers more intently, as that aspect of crowdfunding is the hallmark of its success. At inXile we look at our relationship with our players from a goodwill perspective and let that dictate our business decisions.

CA: The benefit has largely been to developers. As much as $3 to 4 million might be to us, it's often not an amount that would make a publisher get out of bed in the morning. Also, having 70 to 80,000 backers may sound impressive, but if those were direct sales from a publisher-driven game, that would be considered disappointing in terms of sales, at least at the console/PC level. However, if that $3 to 4 million game goes on to sell 3 to 4 million copies, then suddenly that's a whole different story because it's proved to publishers that there's a market for a type of game or game genre they thought was dead.

MG: Publishers who pay attention to numbers may find 'dead genres' with larger fan bases than they thought. I'm not convinced that it will have a major impact beyond that.

> "I had felt strongly that it was nothing less than a movement and fundamental shift of the games business"



Tim Shafer's *Double Fine Adventure* rocketed past its $400,000 goal to secure $3,336,371 of funding on Kickstarter.



BEST NEWCOMER
Dean Hall



Reflecting on his rollercoaster year, Dean 'Rocket' Hall, recalls a real trough in the middle of June 2012. "I guess the low was probably, for me, coming back from E3 and feeling the weight of things. I'd had a lot of offers of money from a lot of companies, but none of them felt quite right. That's when the gravity of it hit me."

Yeah, that sounds like a real drag to us too, to have created *DayZ*, a freely downloadable mod for game that, even at the time, was breaking records and bringing new life back to the two-year-old Arma II. So popular that people were offering undisclosed sums of money for it. We're assuming they're fairly considerable; not just a tenner and a pat on the back.

So why was he feeling low? "I'd arrived back in Prague and I'd only planned to be in the Czech Republic for six months, so I had this whole other life planned, not in videogames. I'd decided only to come back to videogames briefly, so I pretty much had to shelve all that. It's good and exciting, but there is some loss associated with that. It all kind of hit into things: my bag got lost on the flight back, I had a billion connections and I was really tired, I'm not good with transatlantic flights, then someone stole one of my other bags at the airport so I was feeling pretty down on myself at the end of that."

DayZ was a promising mod from the start. Dean had hoped to generate a few hundred users when it launched in April, but by May it had 50,000 uniques. It was still growing exponentially, hitting the magic million by the beginning of August, but taking the mod standalone with his own team was not part of his life plan.

May

- ***The Elder Scrolls Online*** **is announced for PC and Mac, an MMORPG in development at ZeniMax Online Studios**
- ***Diablo III*** **is released worldwide, causing outrage over its always-on internet connection requirement**
- ***Kingdoms Of Amalur*** **developer 38 Studios and Big Huge Games close. Epic Games creates new studio**



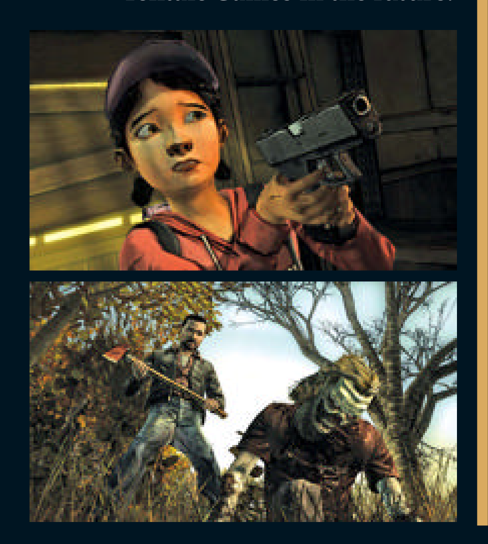
- **Naughty Dog's founder Jason Rubin leaves to become THQ's president, replacing Danny Bilson**

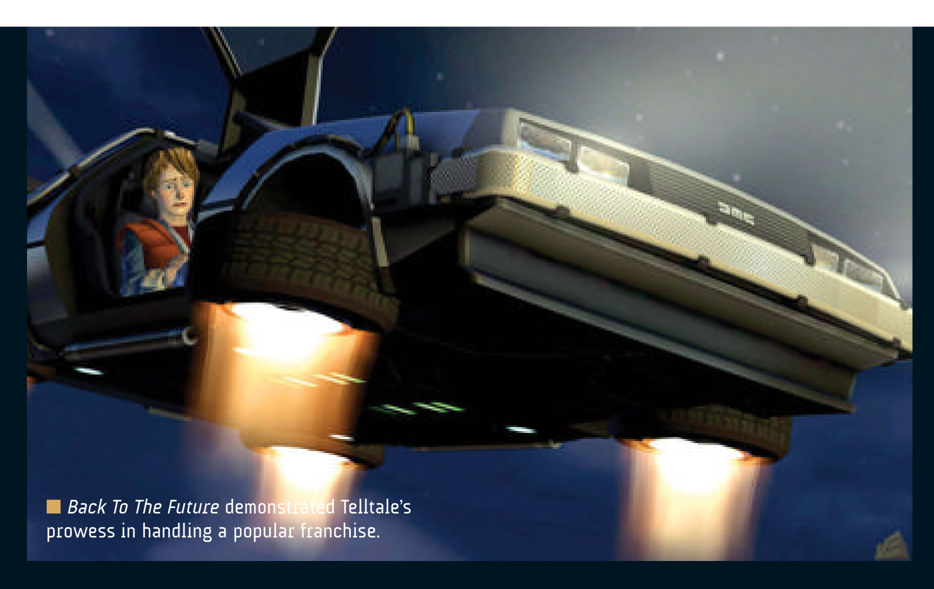
June

- ***Beyond: Two Souls*** **is confirmed as a PS3 title, with Ellen Page playing the main character via mo-cap**
- **Microsoft announces SmartGlass, the tablet and phone app that works in conjunction with Xbox 360 games**
- **In a move that made most of the industry cry, Microsoft's video content service Inside Xbox is cancelled**
- **Dean 'Rocket' Hall launches his popular zombie mod *DayZ* for *Arma II*, becoming an overnight success story**
- **To the surprise of few, Microsoft announces its Surface tablet. Rumours of an Xbox-branded tablet persist**

BEST DEVELOPER
Telltale

AS YOU'VE PROBABLY already gathered, 2012 has been a year of change for the games industry: big budget triple-A games are failing to meet expectations, while smaller, indie titles with far narrower appeal are beginning to become more and more viable. Which is why games™ wants to celebrate Telltale Games: no developer better encapsulates the changes of 2012 more than Telltale. With its episodic *The Walking Dead* adventure game on top of so many Game Of The Year lists it should come as no surprise that the future is bright for Telltale Games. We chat to Dan Connors, co-founder and CEO, and Kevin Bruner, co-founder and CTO, about how the company built its reputation, crafted an identity in an increasingly difficult market and what we can expect to see from Telltale Games in the future.





■ *Back To The Future* demonstrated Telltale's prowess in handling a popular franchise.

Telltale carved out a niche for itself in a digital age, but what key element do you think helped create the company's success?

Dan Connors: I think the fact that we had a clear vision of what we wanted to accomplish and stuck to it is the biggest key. Two of the main goals that we had were creating a compelling storytelling mechanic and being episodic, these both give us a lot of what we need to be a successful digital company.

In the grand scheme of things, Telltale is a fairly new developer, would you consider yourself as having a heritage and, if so what would that be? How do you try and cultivate that image?

Kevin Bruner: Many people at Telltale have been doing this for a long time. We have people who have worked on *Jedi Knight, Grim Fandango, X-Wing* – so it's not new for us to be working on games at this level. We've also been able to bring on a lot of really strong new talent that is interested in pushing boundaries, and this balance has worked really well. When I think about our legacy there is something we say around the office, which is, "Only Telltale." If we are talking about a licence or an approach it often occurs to us there is no one else that would do it. I think it speaks to how different we are and how willing we are to try new things.

You've had a lot of success on existing IP, converting into games that are undisputedly Telltale: do you prefer adapting existing IP, or would you rather branch out into your own things?

Kevin Bruner: When you think of the things we have been addressing, building an episodic production model, creating a digital publishing model and evolving narrative gaming, it has made sense to have a very stable base of proven content to work with. Over the next couple of years it's likely we will build something original, yet still likely in a partnership, that generates a story across multiple media and devices.

What's next for Telltale Games and where would you like to see the company in, say, ten years time?

Dan Connors: We are currently hard at work on the project based on Bill Willingham's *Fables* and thinking about Season Two of *The Walking Dead.* In addition to this, we are looking for new licences that can provide really interesting storytelling opportunities. In ten years I expect that interactive content will be the primary form of mass media entertainment and that Telltale will be working closely with talent from across entertainment to define what that content is.

> "In ten years I expect that interactive content will be the primary form of mass media entertainment"

July

- Sony acquires cloud gaming service Gaikai for $380 million, with the intention to bring the service to all of its products

- Indie-focused console Ouya is launched on Kickstarter, finishing with a cool $8.5 million in funding



- Unreal Engine 4 is revealed, with Epic's *Fortnite* confirmed to be one of the first games in development

August

- OnLive, the cloud gaming rival to Gaikai, is forced to declare bankruptcy and form a new company under the same name

- *Guild Wars 2* launches to such success that developer ArenaNet halts sales until more servers have been added

- *Sleeping Dogs* is launched to huge success, remaining number one in the UK charts for three weeks straight

September

- Valve launches Steam Greenlight, a community-backing service that helps indie developers get games published

- *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* is announced, featuring open-world gameplay and the return of Big Boss

- Molyneux's first project at 22Cans, *Curiosity: What's Inside The Cube?*, is revealed to waiting fans

2012 IN NUMBERS

823,506

THE HIGHEST GAMERSCORE, EARNED BY GUINNESS WORLD RECORD HOLDER STALLION83



$1.6 million

THE MOST PRIZE MONEY IN AN ESPORTS TOURNAMENT, DOLED OUT BY VALVE FOR THE DOTA 2 INTERNATIONAL 2012



32 million

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS HAS 3 MILLION CONCURRENT PLAYERS, 12 MILLION ACTIVE PLAYERS DAILY, 32 MILLION A MONTH

8,163,318

THE NUMBER OF PC COPIES THAT MINECRAFT HAS SOLD TO DATE. THE XBOX 360 VERSION HAS SOLD AN ESTIMATED 1 MILLION

HARDWARE SALES MONTH BY MONTH:

JAN – 4,487,360
FEB – 3,920,911
MAR – 4,007,908
APR – 2,683,649
MAY – 2,188,011
JUN – 2,933,366
JUL – 2,332,040
AUG – 2,533,282
SEP – 2,888,711
OCT – 2,837,303
NOV – 3,512,192

BLACK OPS II SALES

US: 5,348,963
UK: 1,632,002
FRANCE: 435,518
GERMANY: 292,138
JAPAN: n/a

FAVOURITE GENRES BY COUNTRY

US: FPS
UK: FPS
FRANCE: Sports
GERMANY: RPG
JAPAN: RPG

Hardware Sales

UK
Xbox 360 – 789,843
3DS – 559,382
PS3 – 550,098
PS Vita – 238,429
Wii – 205,287

Germany
PS3 – 447,549
3DS – 308,651
Xbox 360 – 291,481
Wii – 177,470
PS Vita – 143,995

Japan
3DS – 3,949,584
PS3 – 983,262
PSP – 699,335
PS Vita – 586,846
Wii – 420,811

France
PS3 – 481,244
3DS – 427,709
Xbox 360 – 273,155
PS Vita – 218,787
Wii – 212,483

US
Xbox 360 – 3,199,464
PS3 – 2,221,963
3DS – 2,215,258
Wii – 1,195,114
PS Vita – 900,001

GAMES SALES

US: 147,418,961
JAPAN: 41,405,627
UK: 30,311,258
GERMANY: 24,519,689
FRANCE: 20,105,547

BESTSELLING GENRES

RPG: 30,321,469
SPORTS: 27,759,528
FPS: 24,215,144
ACTION-ADVENTURE: 14,363,971
THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER: 12,379,810
PARTY/DANCE: 9,449,390
RACING: 7,063,597
PLATFORM: 3,665,677

October

- Cliff Bleszinski leaves Epic Games to "chart the next stage of his career". It is not yet known exactly what that will be. Watch this space

- After years in development, *Retro City Rampage* is finally released for retro fans on Steam, 360, PS3 and PS Vita

- *Black Ops: Declassified* developer Nihilistic Software announces it will no longer be developing boxed retail games

November

- Nintendo's interesting Wii U console is released in the US, then the UK. Japan is last with a launch in December

- Kickstarter launches here in the UK, with several key British developers beginning pitches



- The second *GTA V* trailer is released over a year after the game's announcement and the world goes nuts

December

- Square Enix launches a *Hitman* Facebook app that enables users to target their friends. Unsurprisingly it's removed almost instantly

- Wii U sells 40,000 units in 48 hours after the launch in the UK. It's a pretty good start for Nintendo's new hardware

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“I’ve had my favourite gaming moments and my worst gaming moments ever in the same game”

DAVID BREVIK, GAZILLION ENTERTAINMENT

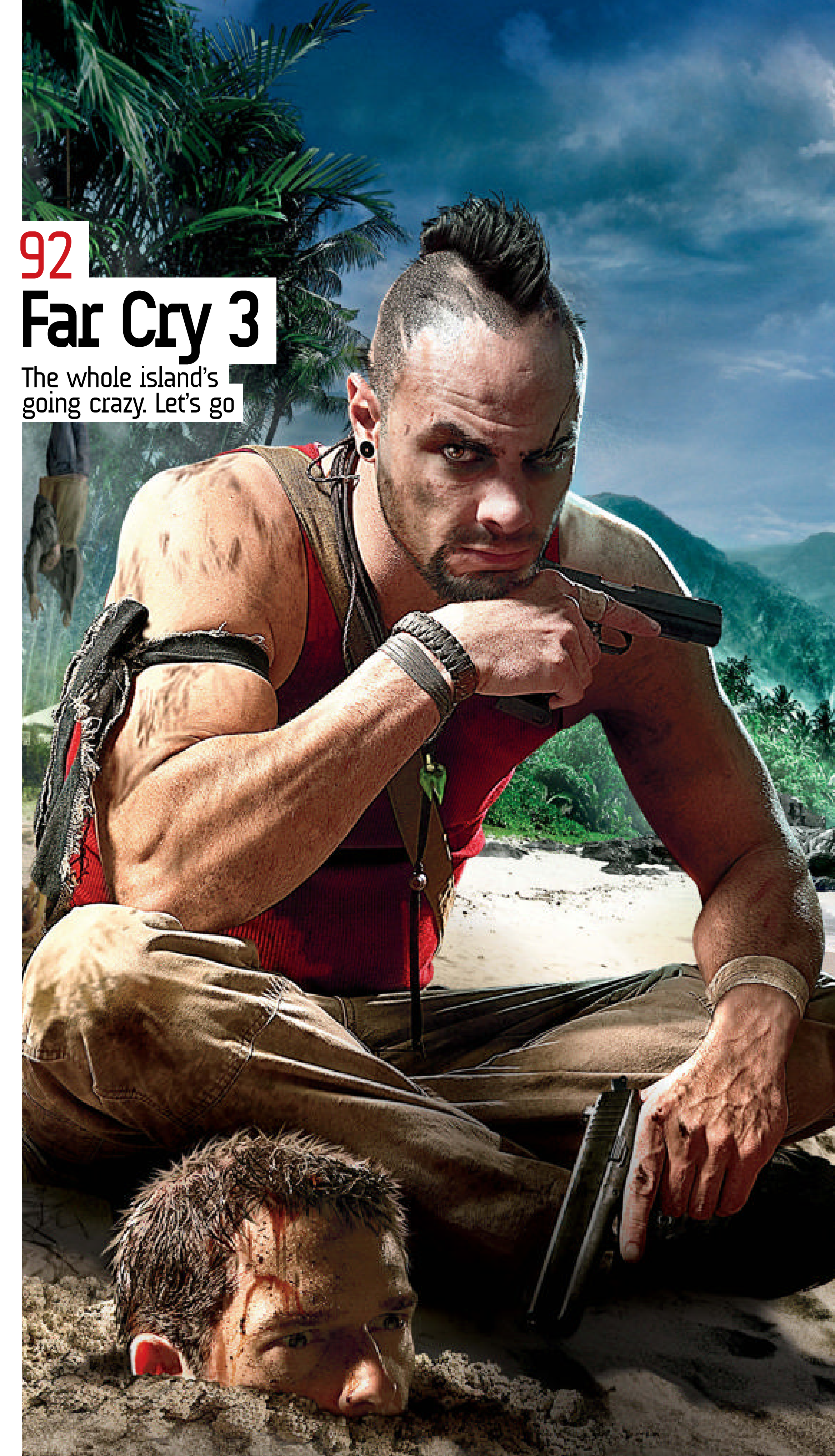
WHY I ...

EverQuest

DAVID BREVIK
GAZILLION ENTERTAINMENT

The game I’ve played the most hours of is EverQuest. *My wife claims that I’m a masochist or something. I don’t know what it was about it, but it was the experience of community and the social aspect of it that really drove me to want to play it. The classes were well designed and the world was very interesting – the graphics weren’t superb, but it always felt like a world and I really enjoyed that. It felt so open and like anything was possible. I love the exploration, I love discovering things, I love the danger and I hated the death penalty. I have more terrible and wonderful stories about* EverQuest *than any other game I’ve ever played; I’ve had my favourite gaming moments and my worst gaming moments ever in the same game. So maybe it’s a big love-hate relationship.*

Reviews



92

Far Cry 3

The whole island's going crazy. Let's go



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or have we nailed it?

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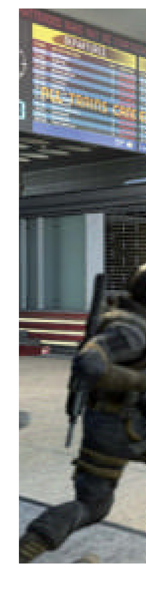

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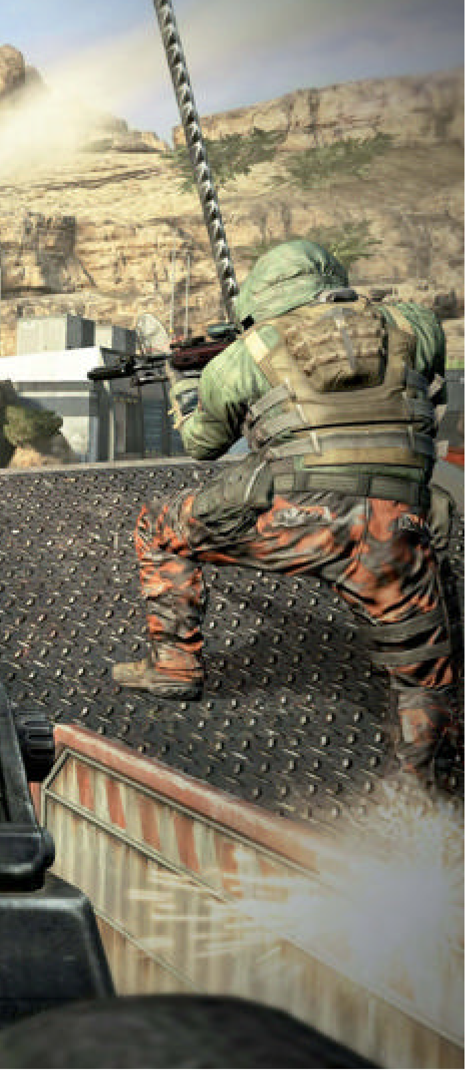
THERE MIGHT BE MORE NUTRITIOUS STUFF OUT THERE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER WHEN YOU'RE IN COD'S FAST FOOD HAZE

DEAD RISING

The third point of Treyarch's gun-heavy triangle is the ever-popular Zombies. It remains an amusing side mode, this time beefed up to feature a bus that can transport players between three maps, and plenty more areas to discover and unlock. As always, it's vital to play with friends and with communications on, as co-ordinated task management is the only real way to survive. Sadly, the three-map Tranzit mode doesn't have the wit or charm of some of the original *Black Ops*' inspired celeb-driven Zombies missions, but with a year's worth of DLC in the pipeline, it's likely they'll appear soon enough. Fun, then, but still a poor man's *Left 4 Dead*.







TREYARCH BRINGS OUT THE BIG GUNS AND MAKES THE WORLD'S RICHEST GAME ITS OWN

Call Of Duty: Black Ops II

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Treyarch
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: It may lack the drama of *Battlefield* or the raw skill of *Halo*, but *COD*'s multiplayer is still the most enthralling and addictive out there.

It's not easy being the biggest game in the world. The pressure to succeed is immense, and there's a gang of naysayers champing at the bit to celebrate your fall from grace should you dare slip below the level expected by the community. Even harder, surely, for a studio that's been established as the B-team, a secondary developer originally charged with plugging the yearly gaps in between Infinity Ward's main events. Treyarch must be feeling that pressure, then, but if it is, it's doing a great job of not showing it. *Black Ops II* is not only a confident, accomplished and surprisingly progressive entry in this most fatted of cash cows, but also the moment where Treyarch takes control of *Call Of Duty* for itself.

The package is split into three distinct sections, as demonstrated by the no-nonsense back of the box and the equally matter-of-fact menu. Anyone who thinks the campaign is the core of the game in 2012, though, only needs to check the subscriber counts on YouTubers like Syndicate and Ali-A. *Call Of Duty* is, quite frankly, a multiplayer phenom. And so that's where we'll start.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PICK 'EM: The new Pick 10 create-a-class system is a much-needed refresh for multiplayer, and adds layers of choice and depth. Time will have to tell on whether really overpowered combos are possible.

With *Black Ops*, Treyarch proved itself as a master of map design, creating arenas suited to both deathmatch and objective games, filled with nuance, memorable choke points and secret passages. *Black Ops II* is no different, featuring another first-class selection of killzones managing to accommodate almost every mode without compromise, and minimising the opportunities for camping and griefing.

Instantly, that familiar *COD* flow comes flooding back. Whether you're diving on capture points in Domination, creeping around in the shadows in Search and Destroy, or just sprinting through a Team Deathmatch, racking up kills, it's as compelling and moreish as ever. It's easy to write off *COD*'s achievement as an online game. It lacks the spectacle and drama of *Battlefield*, or the multidimensional weaponry and unscripted excitement of *Halo*, yet its popularity and



Above: Few sights are more welcome in gaming than an unsuspecting opponent running out in front of you, side-on. Thank you very much.

Left: Many of the streaks are drone-based, thanks to the 2025 setting. Hunter Killer drones are like lethal paper aeroplanes, while the Swarm streak will unleash a ton of the buggers onto the enemy.



constant presence at the top of the Live charts prevails over both.

Why? It's like comfort food. McDonald's fries, or a tube of Pringles. There might be more nutritious stuff out there, but that doesn't matter when you're in *COD*'s fast food haze. The relentless flow of XP, unlocks, treats and challenges; the never-ending customisation options; the maps, the modes, the knife kills. Thud, thud, thud. Is there a better noise? Not when it's accompanied by 100XP and another victim of your itchy trigger finger. And it just keeps on rolling.

It would have been easy for Treyarch to play it safe and dole out another Infinity Ward-apeing feature set, but David Vonderhaar and his multiplayer team decided to set about improving everything that makes *COD* sacred. Now, to some that might mean a complete overhaul, but *Call Of Duty*'s style is almost as established as a sport. So, when Treyarch makes changes, it does so in the back end. The old create-a-class system has been thrown out and redesigned, now falling under its new moniker, Pick 10.

Instead of a rigid framework for weapons, perks and attachments, *Black Ops II* allows you to select ten loadout options. So you might drop a perk in order to carry an extra attachment, or ditch secondary grenades to load up on perks. This bold design choice fills the multiplayer with possibility, and you can easily level all the way up to Prestige without truly settling on a loadout – a far cry from the original *Black Ops*' 'AK-74u and you're done'.

Treyarch is keen to push hard into the eSports world too, offering the ability to sign up for league play where you're matched into a division based on a trial period. All items are unlocked, and you can livestream your games on CODcast, an impressive new bandwidth-hungry broadcasting mode. What will hurt its attempts to push *Dota 2* and *StarCraft* from the top of the eSports ladder, though, is latency compensation. Currently, it's all too common to get killed by single shots, only to watch the killcam replay and see your opponent casually stroll up to you and pop three or four shots into your chest. It's infuriating, and a problem that Treyarch desperately needs to address.

Also, during these early days, it does appear to favour SMG players. Vonderhaar has promised to kill any myths about weapon balance with statistics, but those who favour a more cautious approach look to be at a disadvantage. It's not uncommon for an online game to suffer teething problems, so let's hope Treyarch keeps on top of them.

Beyond the gladiatorial arena of multiplayer, *Black Ops II* of course features a flashy campaign that continues the story of Woods and Mason from the first game, as well as a future yarn starring Mason's son, and the Michael Rooker-voiced Harper. Although it's hard to shake the feeling that much of the set-piece-heavy gameplay is built to service TV ads rather than hardcore FPS players, there's still been a commendable amount of effort and thought put into the action.

While much of the campaign is linear, Treyarch has included branching storylines with *Walking Dead*-style choices, multiple endings, and all-new Strike Force missions

FAQs

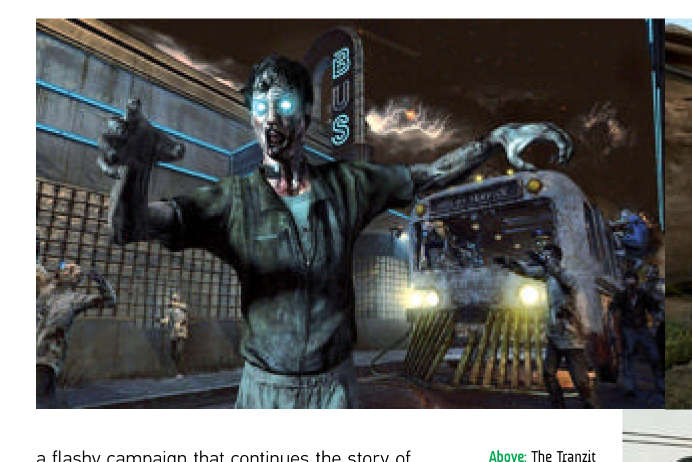
Q. BEST LOADOUT?
Still early days, but combinations of the MP7 with three attachments are looking tasty.

Q. WORTH PLAYING THE CAMPAIGN?
Once, yes.

Q. BEST VOICE ACTOR?
It's got to be everyone's favourite pseudo-hobo, Michael Rooker.



Right: The *COD* engine is certainly looking past its sell-by date, but is still capable of conjuring up some beautifully lit environments. More importantly, though, it remains locked at 60fps, which is crucial for the feel of the multiplayer.

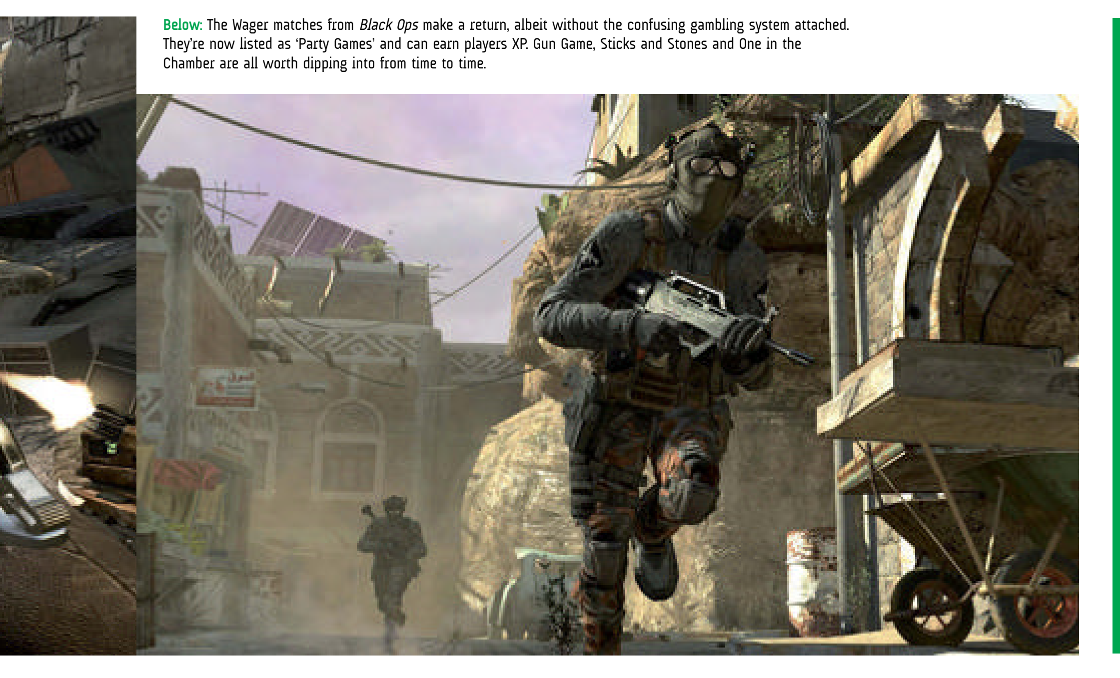


Above: The Tranzit bus gets you to the three different Zombies maps, and can be overrun by the undead. It's a novel twist.



IN RAUL MENENDEZ, THE FRANCHISE HAS ITS SEXIEST BADDIE BY FAR – A KIND OF DIGITAL BROTHER-IN-LAW TO SKYFALL'S JAVIER BARDEM

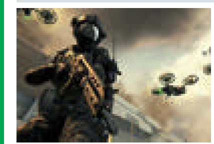
Below: The Wager matches from *Black Ops* make a return, albeit without the confusing gambling system attached. They're now listed as 'Party Games' and can earn players XP. Gun Game, Sticks and Stones and One in the Chamber are all worth dipping into from time to time.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

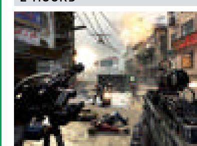
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



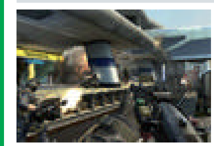
Campaign started, many men shot, and an alarming number of people burned alive. It's the same old thing, but as competent as always.

2 HOURS



Time for a dip into multiplayer to see what's going on. 30 matches later, and you're still in there, hoovering up XP and fostering that precious K/D ratio.

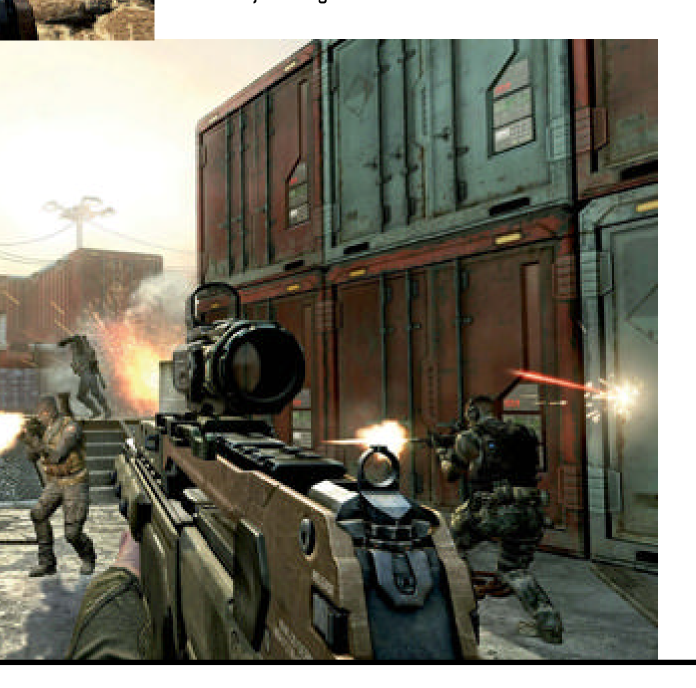
3 DAYS



Campaign finished, nicely levelled up in multiplayer, and a few sessions on Zombies out of the way. It's that familiar November feeling, and Treyarch has delivered it with panache.

COD WARS

As well as branching story elements, the campaign features a new Strike Force mode, which attempts to rope RTS elements into the *COD* framework, with mixed results. Enemies attack a fairly open map, and you can use an overhead camera to select and direct troops to defend. Unfortunately, the friendly AI is all but useless, so you'll have to hotswap into specific soldiers and vehicles in order to have any success. It's commendable that Treyarch has tried to switch up the increasingly stale *COD* formula, but the fact that three quarters of the Strike Force missions are optional is a fairly damning indictment of their quality. A brave try, but *COD* is better when it's just being *COD*.



(see boxout) that do disrupt the typical *Call Of Duty* rhythm. As you flit between the Eighties and 2025, Treyarch does good work in establishing a sense of place and time, littering every mission with memorable set pieces. The horse-riding and wingsuit are two highlights.

You're now given the option to customise your loadout at the beginning of each mission too, including gun selection and perks. It's a decision that benefits the variety of the gameplay but damages the relative validity of the narrative, as you feel like a videogame character rather than a 'warfighter', to use the parlance of our times.

It's a confident and thoroughly enjoyable campaign, skilfully written and assuredly conceived. It could never offer the kind of depth and combat variety of a *Halo* or *Far Cry*, but Treyarch has expanded the boundaries of what is possible in single-player *Call Of Duty*. And in Raul Menendez, the franchise has its sexiest baddie by far – a kind of digital brother-in-law to *Skyfall*'s Javier Bardem. Although quite what happens in the post-credit sequence is for the psychiatrists to dissect. Utter madness.

Zombies does an admirable if limited job of rounding out another chunky *COD* package, this time pushing towards an open-world structure, but ultimately continuing the esoteric co-op survival theme that has won it a legion of fans over two previous games. In truth, anyone who's played *Left 4 Dead* will find Zombies a little facile, especially as *Black Ops II* doesn't feature a celebrity cast list. Expect a host of DLC to improve and flesh out the mode, and a raft of YouTube vids to reveal all of its secrets.

Really, though, it is all about that competitive multiplayer. Treyarch will hope that *Black Ops II* makes a genuine splash on the professional scene this year, especially after bringing in pro-gaming celeb Hastr0 to consult on the CODcast system. For the rest of us, it's still a compelling and unusually addictive carnival of carnage, with an RPG level of customisable depth and a dangerously enthralling flow of XP, medals and rewards.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MULTI PLAYER: Multi-team mode makes its *COD* debut, and is just as manic as it is elsewhere.
LAG DRAG: The lag compensation can be a nightmare for gun-on-gun battles.

Treyarch has approached *Black Ops II* with a swagger, almost. The changes it has made to multiplayer are the most interesting since *Call Of Duty 4* revolutionised online warfare, the way it has approached the campaign is laudable, and the *Black Ops* name is now as significant, or even more so, than *Modern Warfare*. Treyarch has made its sunny Santa Monican base a true city of *COD*. What can Infinity Ward do next year?

VERDICT 8/10
BACK IN BLACK, AND FEELING GOOD ABOUT ITSELF



WILL NINTENDO'S LAWYERS BE TOO BUSY PLAYING TO CARE?

PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

Is it *Smash Bros* or is it not *Smash Bros*? That is the question. It's a question Sony faced as soon as *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* was announced, it's a battle that the marketing team has been fighting for the past few months, and it's an identity crisis the game itself wrestles with. The good news is that this isn't an uninspired, by-the-numbers *Smash Bros* clone. The bad news is… well, we'll come to that.

There are obvious similarities between *PlayStation All-Stars* and Nintendo's series, but they don't stretch far beyond the superficial. Each match sees four characters plucked from Sony's back catalogue plus notable third-party guests fighting each other. The levels are broken up with platforms, the characters are floaty, and the action is, for want of a more technical term, button-bashy. There are items to pick up and use, random hazards from the environment to avoid, and the special moves are flashy, over-the-top and colourful. So far, so *Smash*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: SuperBot
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

But the scoring system is different enough that it sets *PlayStation All-Stars* apart. The only way to score points is by eliminating an opponent, and the only way to do that is by landing a super. You build up meter by landing special moves, which are assigned to face buttons used together with different directions. Without any light punches or medium kicks to cancel into supers, and with jumping a largely evasive manoeuvre, this is really all about the special moves.

There are a huge variety of them on offer too, all tying in with their respective character's trademark moves. The Big Daddy has a shoulder rush, drill attack and super armour on most of his moves, allowing him to absorb one hit. Sir Daniel Fortesque has disembodied hands, a shield and all his weapons from *MediEvil*. *Heavenly Sword*'s Nariko has swinging air attacks and quick combos; Sly Cooper can turn invisible to escape danger; Dante has moves taken straight from *DmC*, including his new Osiris and Arbiter weapons, and so on. Each move has its own purpose, ranging from dishing out more meter to crumpling opponents. There's a block button amid all this, but the frantic nature of *PlayStation All-Stars* means blocking is more of a desperation measure than anything else, particularly as jumping is so good at getting out of a tight spot.

THERE'S NOTHING HERE THAT DEMANDS ONE-FRAME LINK COMBOS AS IN STREET FIGHTER IV

Eventually, you'll build enough meter for a super, but you can keep going and save up for a level 3 attack. This is what gives *PlayStation All-Stars* its tactical edge. When you attempt a super, you commit to spending your entire meter at once, so you have to weigh up what your options are. Where are your opponents?

FAQs

Q. HOW DIFFICULT IS IT?
On All-Star difficulty it feels more cheap than fair, but there's nothing too strenuous. It's also really easy to get into.

Q. WHO ARE THE BEST CHARACTERS?
It's too early to tell the overall tiering, but Kratos, Nariko and PaRappa are really good characters.

Q. HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE STORY MODE?
Around an hour per character, but you can then go back and unlock extra items for them.



Below: During the *Buzz!* stage, a question will be asked and you have to 'land' on the right platform to answer for orbs. Those touches help bring each stage to life and add variety.



Right: All level 3 supers begin with a cut-scene showing that player powering up

Below: Raiden's powerful level 1 has put him among the stronger characters already.



Are they grouped together? Should you risk your meter now on a level 1 super or build up for an almost guaranteed level 3 kill? Complicating matters is that meter can be stolen via special moves and throws, while each super is drastically different too – Heihachi sends Kuma after opponents, while Nariko jumps behind a cannon and opens fire. Online runs smoothly, which is important given the fast pace of the action. There's nothing here that demands one-frame link combos as in *Street Fighter IV*, as the fighting is extremely easy to grasp and understand, even if the scoring system of needing supers to score points isn't quite as intuitive. But regardless of the simplicity, it's still good to see how smooth netplay is. It's too early to judge how well balanced the characters are, but based on our online play so far, it seems that players will drift towards Kratos, with close-range brawlers far easier to hold your own with than the long-range fighters like Radec or Sir Daniel.

It's a shame that, having fought and won the difficult battle of finding a new identity, *PlayStation All-Stars* doesn't have the content to see it through. There's nothing really involving for the single-player side of the package. The ideas are there but nothing feels substantial. Arcade mode has story, but it's little more than narration and artwork bookending a series of meaningless fights. Combo challenges are present, but they're really easy to blitz. Unlockables are present for every character, but they're aesthetic tweaks rather than anything fundamental that will motivate you.

Yet the bigger problem is highlighted by the online community using Kratos ad nauseam – the character select screen needs fleshing out. There's a pleasing variety of characters, from the metallic bulk of Big Daddy to the nippy Sly Cooper, but there simply isn't enough of them. A big part of the appeal of games like *Super Smash Bros* or *Marvel vs Capcom 3* is dipping into a huge cast of characters to find your favourites. This feels a few characters too short – Crash and Spyro are the notable absentees from Sony's glory years, and while we'll never know the full story of what hoops SuperBot had to jump through just to get the characters here, DLC notwithstanding, this end result feels a good few faces short.

This doesn't quite seem like the end game for Sony, then, but rather the birth of a new series that should prove to be as long-running and successful as *Smash Bros*, if this debut is anything to go by. And that's one comparison we're sure Sony won't mind at all.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CROSS-PLAY: Playing against Vita owners is, for all intents and purposes, just like playing against a PS3 player, and vice versa for Vita owners playing against those on the PS3. There's no apparent difference.



LIVIN' LA VITA LOCA

The Vita version is almost identical to its bigger PlayStation 3 brother, with a handful of differences. It's not quite as sharp, the presentation is a little drab, and you have to tap the screen to pick up items, but otherwise it's the same. If anything, the action feels at home on the Vita versus the big screen, where the slight nature of the single-player content and need to dip in and out of challenges lends itself to gaming on the move.



VERDICT 7/10
GOOD START FOR SONY'S SERIES BUT NEEDS MORE CONTENT

FAR CRY GOES BACK TO THE PACIFIC, BUT IS ROOK ISLAND A GOOD MOVE?

Far Cry 3*

Attacking an enemy encampment, of which there are dozens, showcases the phenomenal amount of detail that Ubisoft has put into Rook Island. From our lofty vantage point, we've clocked it even before we check for the red flag on our map: the plume of black smoke is unmissable for miles around. We sprint a few hundred metres cross-country, because Jason Brody has the stamina of a gazelle and Hoyt's guards are so stupid that we could be doing the YMCA at the end of this road and they wouldn't notice. Close that distance, though, and things change dramatically.

We hit crouch to engage stealth and make use of a large group of ferns on top of a small knoll that overlooks the corrugated metal camp fence. We've already seen the sniper intently focused on a 90-degree field of view immediately ahead of the main entrance, plus the two guards on the gate itself, but judging by the size of the camp there could be anything up to a dozen others there and a caged wild animal, by the sounds of things. So we pop out our camera that intelligently highlights baddies and allows us to track them through walls, even when we've put it away – never really explained but blithely accepted – then wait.

Sure enough, two normal guards armed with AKs patrol into view and, by zooming in, we've highlighted two of those Molotov-wielding chargers. They're busy welding with their backs to any potential threat, and we know from experience that they won't pay a blind bit of notice to us unless we put a knife in their neck or the alarm sounds. Speaking of which, we've just spotted that too: a big and conspicuously red box attached to a post. Fab. We're not going to shoot it with our silenced M-700 sniper rifle, though. We're going to kill the entire camp's system by creeping in there and cutting the wires, preventing anyone from

ENHANCED

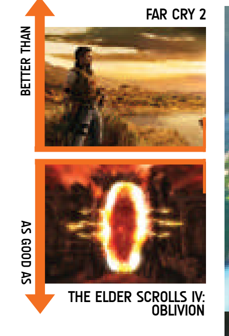
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LESS IS MORE: Respawning checkpoints and malaria, two of the biggest grievances surrounding *Far Cry 2*, thankfully make no reprise on Rook Island, leaving you to explore without hindrance.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: 360, PS3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-14
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, DirectX 9.0c graphics with 512MB VRAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

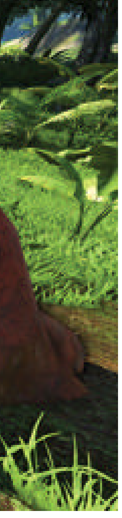
IT IS A TRULY GIGANTIC MAP, ABSOLUTELY RAMMED WITH THE KIND OF ACTIVITIES YOU'D EXPECT IN A FIRST-PERSON SANDBOX WORLD LIKE THIS





Right: Blowing stuff up and getting away with it. *Far Cry 3* has more than a touch of *Just Cause* about it, and that's not merely down to the tropical setting.

Above: *Far Cry 3* is stuffed with mini-games, accessed via markers throughout Rook Island. They're score-based and yield extra XP when a higher tier is achieved. You'll also get your name on the rock once you've nailed the high score. Right: Your digital camera takes photos, of course, which you'll need for some missions, but more importantly, it allows you to zoom in on enemies or animals and tag them for tracking.





RADIO GAGA

There are 18 radio towers in *Far Cry 3* and you only have to capture one of them, though you'll end up making a beeline for them when they're nearby purely because they make life so much easier in the area immediately surrounding it. They work like Borgia Towers in *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*: make the climb to the top, open the fuse box next to the antenna, then remove the scrambler and the radio tower will open up the map around it, marking every nearby location of note on the map. Securing a radio tower unlocks new weapons to purchase in friendly stores, too.

calling reinforcements. Then we're going to slaughter the lot of them with our machete before they even realise they're dead. Having taken out over a dozen camps by means subtle and otherwise, it's the stealthy approach that offers the most satisfaction and the biggest experience rewards. Three times that of kicking down the door and asking if anyone's home with our shotgun, in fact.

We creep down to a conveniently placed hole in the fence at the back of the camp, slip through and shimmy up to the wall of a shack. There's that wild animal, a tiger in a cage, growling in agitation, but none of the guards seem bothered. We could let it out to play, which is always fun to watch, but right now we fancy getting our hands dirty and the two welders are easy targets. We watch the patrolling guards pass, edge towards the nearest one and then execute a takedown, crossing several metres in a fraction of a second and sticking our machete through his torso in one swift motion. Takedowns are a learned ability in the *Far Cry 3* skill system, but for some reason so is catching the corpse as it falls and dragging it away to a more secluded spot where it's less likely to be noticed. Annoyingly, moving bodies once they've fallen is impossible, as if Brody is so fastidious about the three-second floor/food rule that he applies it to assassinations, too.

The second welder goes the same way: he's halfway through muttering something about it being too hot and that somebody should just shoot him, when we interrupt him with a knife in his throat – sorry, mate. We wait for the patrol to do their rounds again before we slip up to the alarm and disable it, just in case, then up the steps to finish off the short-sighted sniper who still has his back to us. We've slightly different tactics for the remaining guards, though.

Keeping our sniper's perch, we approach the brow of the roof and wait for the first, then the second of the patrolmen to pass, before executing another technique in our arsenal of stealth skills: the 'death from above' takedown. It's even easier than the standard one; we simply wait until enemy number two is directly beneath us, blissfully unaware of our deadly presence hovering above him, machete poised, then jump on top of him and let the game do the rest. We've done this from one of the many zip lines attached to cliffs and radio towers and, as long as you're somewhere in the ball park above an enemy, Brody has the unerring ability to swerve midair and hit his mark. This is just a few feet, so a cinch really. Then, before the dead guard's partner can walk full circle and discover the body – it's on the ground, remember, so we

FAQs

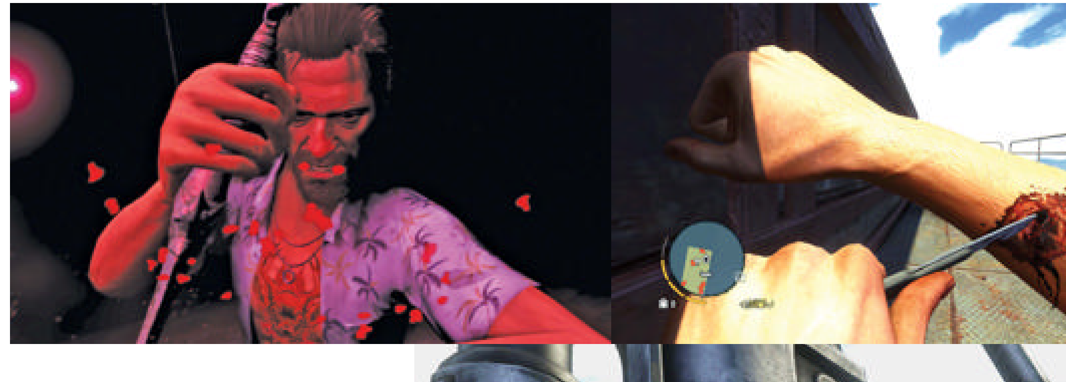
Q. WHAT'S THE CO-OP?
The co-op game is a two to four-player game featuring a hitman, ex-soldier, crooked cop or Scottish thug, set six months before the single-player story.

Q. VAAS IS THE BOSS?
As far as Jason Brody is concerned, he might as well be. But madman Vaas Montenegro is employed by Hoyt Volker, who pulls the strings behind the scenes.

Q. THERE ARE TWO MAPS?
There might be. We'd rather not spoil the nice surprise. All we're going to say is that the game is bigger than meets the eye.



Right: *Far Cry 3* has every mode of transportation covered: land, sea and air. Rook Island is a pretty violent place to live, so a lot of these vehicles have machine gun mountings, including this boat, which is a lot of fun to drive.

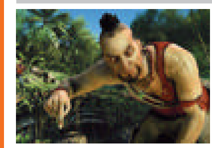




TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

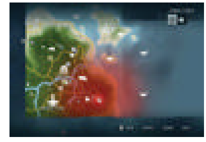
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



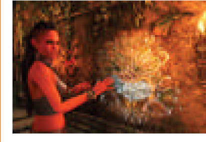
Captured! Brody's adventure begins hoofing it away from Vaas who, for some reason, takes personal offence to the fact that you refuse to die. Probably simply because he's slightly insane.

3 HOURS



There's plenty to keep you occupied in the immediate surroundings of the village where Brody starts alone, but your range will quickly expand with your need to improve your inventory.

3 DAYS



With the help of the Rakyat and a certain warrior goddess, Brody has unlocked the warrior within him and is halfway to getting his vengeance. He also has some cool tattoos now.



Left: The bigger weapons in *Far Cry 3* are tremendous fun, aided in no small part by how much of the bad guys' furniture can be blown to pieces.



Left: This is us, pulling bullets out of our arm in the ten seconds or so we have before we're going to start getting shot at again. You take what you can get on Rook Island.

Below: We think the pictures speak for themselves, but we will allow ourselves this little bit of fawning over *Far Cry 3*'s visuals: it looks good on consoles and average PCs, but if you have a powerful gaming rig, prepare to explode your eyes.



WHEN AS GAMERS WE'RE SO OFTEN LEFT FEELING SHORT-CHANGED, FAR CRY 3 IS ALSO OVERWHELMINGLY FANTASTIC VALUE FOR MONEY

can't touch it – we swiftly pace halfway around his beat and drop him, too.

The final two we have a little fun with. They're both still focused on the area of jungle outside the camp, talking to themselves about burning pee and wishing they wore a 'rubber'. Apparently, the clap is doing the rounds on Rook Island, because all the bad guys can be heard to curse the local whores at one point or another, a little like the pandemic of crippled veterans whining about taking arrows to the knee in *Skyrim*, though we can't imagine this one being quite as meme-tastic as that.

The guards are fairly close to each other, which would pose a problem for a standard takedown if we wanted to remain unseen and still get a triple XP score for taking the camp without alerting anyone. Chained takedowns allow us to swiftly follow one kill with another by tapping in the direction of the next closest guard, and a very satisfying manoeuvre it is too. We've sufficiently developed that particular tree of skills so that we can lob an enemy's knife at the next if he's just out of range. Either way, the camp is taken silently and the blue flag of the Rakyat people is hoisted as, to our relief, the good guys roll in to secure the camp.

There it is: a snapshot of your *Far Cry 3* experience, assuming you take the stealthy option at all – and you will, for a lot of the time, given that you're vastly outnumbered. More importantly for us, once you've secured that encampment, it remains in the hands of your allies, who can more capably defend it than its previous owners. There's no magical enemy respawn seconds after you've crossed the other side of an invisible boundary, unlike *Far Cry 3*'s predecessor, so no sense of utter futility as you criss-cross your way back and forth across the enormous map.

It is a truly gigantic map too, rammed with the kind of activities you'd expect in a first-person sandbox world like this: exploring via dune buggies, Jet Skis and hang gliders; hunting; chatting to the locals; discovering myriad rare artefacts; and, of course, shooting the bad guys and blowing their shit up. The world is so big that, with a single-minded intent to complete it during our relatively short review period, we spent most of our time playing the story missions. Turns out that what we thought was the end of the game is, in fact, just the end of the first act. Remember *Far Cry 2*, when you opened up the whole of the map, only to discover it's actually only half of it? Well, that.

Far Cry 3's plot is a bit silly and inconsistent, its AI a bit dumb and predictable, and the world works in a suspiciously similar way to *Assassin's Creed*, but it's great fun. And perhaps even more importantly, these days, when as gamers we're so often left feeling short-changed, it's also overwhelmingly fantastic value for money.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ISLAND MENTALITY: Everyone on Rook Island is on the brink of smearing themselves with their own faeces, even the good guys. Apparently it does help to be mad in this place.

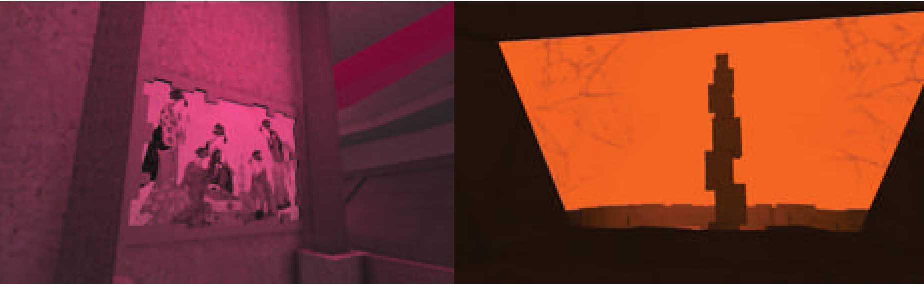


BIG FUN, SUPERB VALUE FOR MONEY


What story there is to *Kairo* is teased out, with only a few definite sections of exposition. It's not enough to get really excited about, but it offers a decent backdrop to proceedings.

BEING ON YOUR OWN DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE LONELY

Kairo



Can games be art? It's a question that… Oh, sorry – wrong opening text. We picked that from the Pile Of Forbidden Intros. *Kairo* is here after a wait of over two years – the indie title developed by one man alone, Richard Perrin, which sees players dropped into a confusing, abstract world to do… what, exactly?

Well, that's part of the fun. Just learning to wander, to look around, to see what remnants of a lost civilisation fill this delightfully unearthly landscape – and, of course, to solve some puzzles while you're at it. But even the addition of more traditional mechanics like 'things to solve' doesn't mean *Kairo* is a particularly complex piece to get involved with. In fact, there isn't even an interact button and certainly no attack command.

Kairo just plops you down and stands back. No tutorial. No hand-holding. Just be curious. Fiddle. Tinker. Work your way through things to the best of your ability. And if you get stuck, Perrin has actually been kind enough to offer you a robust hints system – 'robust' in the sense that it goes from 'decent clues' to 'solving the whole damn thing' in three easy steps. It's a touch of simplicity that could only come from a package so clearly steeped in complexity of creation. Don't let the unsophisticated looks put you off, as they have many online dissenters. *Kairo* is beautiful, with a strong design ethic behind it.

It's an experience open to a fair bit of interpretation, and from this comes much of the exploration talked about in *Kairo*'s pre-release gumph. You won't be looking at hundreds of miles of painstakingly re-created West Coast American countryside, but you will be looking at a world that fills you with a similar sense of wonder. The physical exploration is backed up by an aloof story running underneath the whole thing; something perfect for those who like to sit back once they're finished and think it over. What it could mean, why it was so, just what that one room meant.

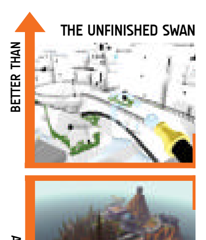
Our interpretation? It's not important. But we can't help but think there are some rather bleak allusions to the world of indie development on show here: lonesome, thankless, something you could die doing. *Kairo* gets into your head, that's for certain.

It's such a beautiful world to explore, such captivating, simple mechanics, and such a lasting impression. You won't get much out of *Kairo* beyond one playthrough – lasting a few brief hours unless you want to gather all the hidden collectables – but it matters little. It is a game that has been crafted with care, love and attention and is the perfect antidote to the usual mainstream fare of guns, graphics and gore.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Locked Door Puzzle
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £5
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE UNFINISHED SWAN



AS GOOD AS: MYST

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SIMPLY COMPLEX: You could describe *Kairo*'s looks as simple, but we feel that would be doing a disservice to a beautiful game with a fair bit of craft gone into the in-game architecture.

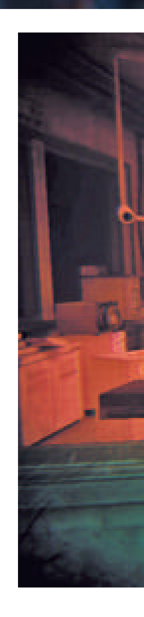
VERDICT 8/10
AT ONCE BEAUTIFUL AND UGLY, SIMPLE AND COMPLEX

YOU CAN IMAGINE THAT UBISOFT HAS ALREADY SET THE WHEELS IN MOTION FOR A SEQUEL THAT TRULY CAPITALISES ON THE IDEAS PRESENTED HERE

MORE BRAIN

ZombiU also features a multiplayer mode that is, for some baffling reason, restricted to local play only. The three modes on offer are survival, capture the flag and time attack, but each operate similarly, with one player using the GamePad and the other a Pro Controller. The player using the GamePad controller is tasked with strategically placing zombis around the screen in an attempt to prevent the Pro Controller player from completing objectives and winning the match. Ultimately, it's an energetic and briefly engaging distraction, but lacks depth to make it more than just an unnecessary bolt-on to the main campaign.





EVERYDAY WE'RE SHUFFLING

ZombiU

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montpellier
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

The unwilling star of the Wii U launch line-up, *ZombiU* pre-release hyperbole would have you believe that this is Nintendo's Triumphant Return To Hardcore, which is, of course, absolute nonsense. But despite the lofty expectations lumbered on Ubisoft's first-person survival-horror game, *ZombiU* is nothing if not the Wii U's killer app.

Foremost, it's refreshing to play a game of this breadth and prominence and find it to be so unencumbered by the plague of tropes that have slowly crept into the genre of late. It's an alarming back-to-basics design that is immediately established, arming players with a meagre selection of weaponry – a sturdy cricket bat and a gun with six bullets – and a backpack before punting them into the wilderness guided only by a mysterious cockney known as The Prepper.

And this is where the oft talked about similarities between *Demon's/Dark Souls* and *ZombiU* surface: you will die. Lots, in fact. Sharing similar sensibilities with From Software, permanent character death is the primary conceit, one that imbues a rare sense of value to your person and possessions. Every time you die you respawn back in the safehouse as a new survivor, your first task being to track down your now zombified remains and regain lost inventory items. As only one dead character can be present within the game at one time, retrieving lost possessions becomes a frantic scavenger mission, with an untimely death resulting in the loss of some of the game's most sought-after spoils.

Therefore the price of death is a heightened challenge, often tasking players to brace the fraught post-apocalyptic landscape with nothing but a bloodied cricket bat and a sharpened wit. Ammo is such a rare commodity among the world that firearms are rarely relied upon and when you find yourself lucky enough to be in possession of precious high-power weaponry you'll likely hang on to it out of fear of a large-scale horde waiting around the next corner.

The zombis [sic] that populate the desolate streets of *ZombiU*'s miserable interpretation of Blighty are your classic breed of shambling

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NEW PAD: The Wii U GamePad is used to varying degrees of success as a backpack, scanner and hacking device, among more superfluous screen-tapping functions.

Left: The survivor is given a syringe at the game's midway point that can be used once to insta-kill a zombi. It can be refilled by extracting virulent from zombi corpses littered around the world.



Left: You'll find a doctor that will assign you a series of fetch tasks. One minor gripe of *ZombiU* is the lack of scope in its mission structure, often sending players to find scraps of paper within specific locations.



Left: The easiest way to travel between locations spread far apart is by using shortcuts accessed through manholes. The primary safehouse location links to every major location in the game and fast travels players via the GamePad map screen.

undead: a single shuffler is an almost laughable foe, but each takes several thumps of the cricket bat to go down, making escalated numbers near impossible to handle without a firearm – which naturally attracts even more attention. There is the option to avoid fighting altogether and use a series of distracting devices to make it through a particularly heavy throng, but flares and the like are as rare as bullets and far less useful in a panicked, reactionary scenario.

It's the unpredictable nature of *ZombiU* that even makes even the well-trodden routes interesting upon return visits. Some stretches of landscape become regular pathways – such is the crisscross nature of the game's mission structure. While it's difficult to pick holes in *ZombiU*'s impressively bleak ambience, less thought has been put into objectives that lead you through the world, as inane fetch quests become the go-to impetus for exploration. But it's clear that the team at Ubisoft Montpellier has concentrated on the journey rather than the destination.

The game refrains from bombarding the player with regular set-pieces, maintaining a considered pace with semi-random zombi placement and simply allowing the tension to organically creep where other games would normally over-engineer an unsettling moment. Particularly when it comes down to resource management, a mechanic that is without a doubt the best demonstration of the Wii U GamePad's nascent capabilities. The GamePad serves as the player's backpack, the act of looting diverting attention away from the action on the television and onto the supplementary screen. The on-screen viewpoint is framed in such a way that you get the smallest glimpse into the background behind the survivor – a red flashing light indicating that if your attention lingers too long on the controller you'll suffer the grim consequences.

It's a strong execution of the conceit that only the Wii U will do, and an idea that the game struggles to match through the rest of its varied mechanics. The GamePad's other main function is as a world map coupled with an *Aliens*-like motion sensor that warns of nearby undead, but much like the environmental scanner – used to reveal puzzle clues and loot in the immediate vicinity – it feels a touch gimmicky, which is sure to be the case once these ideas have been overused to tedium in years to come.

The controls in general feel sloppy. Aiming is loose, lacking heft with firearms that can often cause bullets to fly wayward, navigation is often disorientating and melee is jerky at the best of times. *ZombiU* has the antiquated touch of a late-Nineties shooter-cum-RPG: full of promising ideas but lacking in functional refinement. The fundamental mechanics here are a lacklustre sort, inexcusable in a market where even the most modest of third-party developed first-person shooters are immaculately tuned. However, what's ironic is that within the prism of the *ZombiU*'s scrappy survivalist approach, the poor handling almost feels perfectly suited.

It's with nervous steps that you'll start roaming the haunted ruins of London, as the game continues to put a higher price on each survivor's life as you make it further through

FAQs

Q. IS IT SCARY?
Yes. While it doesn't over-egg the horror aspect, there are several frightening moments that will catch you off-guard.

Q. IS IT THE BEST WII U GAME?
Without a doubt. While *New Super Mario Bros U* is reliable entertainment, *ZombiU* is undoubtedly the only game to test the new system.

Q. IS IT LIKE DARK SOULS?
Yes and no. While it certainly has its more devilish design details, it's a less open world and lacks the consistency in tone.



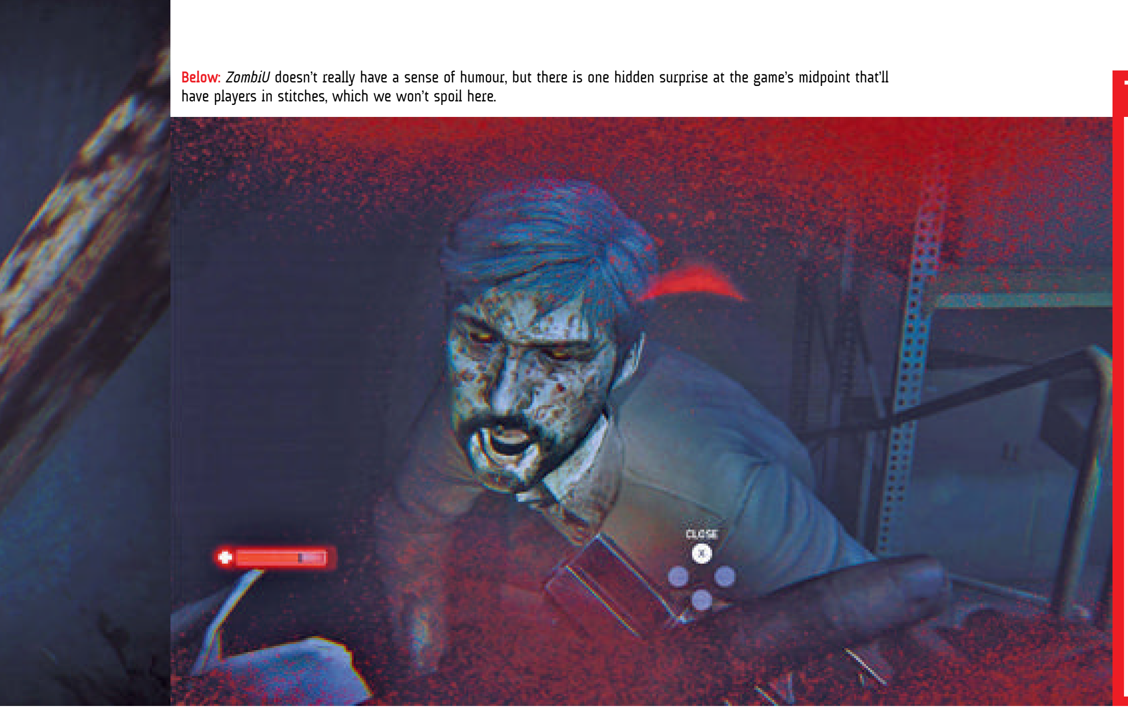
Right: One of the later zombi variants is packed with explosives, that will cause instant death if it manages to get too close. A precisely-aimed shot in one of its propane tanks will put an end to its marauding.



Above: Zombis will endlessly swipe at the player before lurching once your health is low.

ZOMBIU HAS THE TOUCH OF A LATE-NINETIES SHOOTER-CUM-RPG: FULL OF PROMISING IDEAS BUT LACKING IN FUNCTIONAL REFINEMENT

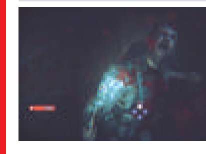
Below: *ZombiU* doesn't really have a sense of humour, but there is one hidden surprise at the game's midpoint that'll have players in stitches, which we won't spoil here.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

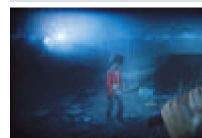
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



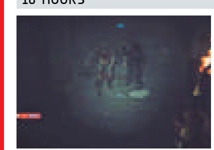
This is probably the first time you'll die, as your safehouse becomes overrun with the dead. You'll respawn back at base as a fresh survivor, having learned your lesson. Or perhaps not.

2 HOURS



Beginning to explore the surrounding areas, scavenging for resources and eventually heading through the London Underground and back up into the depths of Buckingham Palace.

10 HOURS



One of the uninspired elements of the game are the fetch quests you're tasked with completing for the majority of the game, most of which are sanctioned by the dear Queen's doctor.

SAVE A LIFE

***ZombiU* doesn't have checkpoints or allow the player to manually save at any point during the campaign. Instead, there are numerous safehouses and rest points where the player is able to stop and save the game. The catch here is that the distance between some of the locations is lengthy, meaning that sometimes it's just easier to pause the game (an option that was unavailable in *Dark Souls*). Travelling between one point to another can be an exercise in frustration, but there's no denying that it contributes to immersing the player further into the hopelessness of their plight and the desperateness of the world around them.**



the wasteland. You won't necessarily feel the consequence of your demise after the first one or two deaths, but it's after you lose your most valued item – that fallback weapon that saved your skin more than once – that the consequences of hasty actions become abundantly clear.

The endless layers of anxiety heaped on the player are utterly relentless, each component of its thoroughly thought-out mechanics another vital ingredient in the masterfully constructed tension. It's helped enormously by the low-key level design, mostly placing the player in tight corridors, or narrow pathways in larger spaces. Outdoor areas are likewise relatively compact, but it encourages the careful, strategic approach that holds the most reward.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

INVADERS: While we were not able to test online play, Ubisoft has stated that other online players will randomly invade your game as zombis, carrying items that you can loot.

The game takes an awkward turn in its final hours, seemingly suffering from a lack of confidence and a capricious attitude. Much of the atmosphere and logic that has been established is tossed aside, revealing an oddly supernatural final act that jars with much of the taut and refrained action that proceeded it. There are unfortunately several notable occasions where *ZombiU* shatters the believability of the universe that it so rigorously spent the majority of its length reinforcing.

Despite such errant stumbles, *ZombiU* is the type of launch title that is becoming increasingly rare these days. Resolutely bold through and through, it's a game that'll put off a huge portion of early Wii U adopters due to its bleak tone and barbed difficulty. But it's also the type of exciting launch title that new systems are made for, pushing the boundaries of contemporary game design into interesting new directions, while exploring the possibilities of the hardware.

It's not a perfect game by any means. The presentation is rough and certainly not at a standard you would expect from neither the end of the last generation or the beginning of a fresh one; the mechanics are flawed to such a degree that many of the simple genre-specific tasks are a chore; and the whole campaign is crushingly linear, lacking the scope you'd initially expect. You can imagine that Ubisoft has already set the wheels in motion for a sequel that truly capitalises on the ideas presented here and refines them into the game that this promises to be. *ZombiU* doesn't quite match its own lofty ambitions then, but that's not without trying. It's without a doubt a thrilling and full-bodied launch title, limited only by its resources and lack of conviction. If this is an indicator of how third-party developers will approach the new system, then the Wii U could be one of the most interesting consoles in Nintendo's long history.



VERDICT 8/10

GREAT IDEAS HAMPERED BY LIMITED SCOPE



THE WORLD'S BIGGEST GAMING SERIES GETS MINIATURISED, BUT LOSES A LOT ALONG THE WAY

Call Of Duty: Black Ops Declassified

If there's one franchise that should be able to extract the Vita from the sales rut it currently finds itself in, it's *Call Of Duty*, but the early omens for this handheld exclusive were far from reassuring. When a publisher refuses to provide review code for a big-name title, it usually suggests that something is amiss with the final product; to bring you this review, we had to purchase a copy from a high street store, just like all the other expectant Vita owners, desperate for another release to showcase the merits of Sony's much-maligned portable.

Black Ops Declassified is certainly a *Call Of Duty* game. Once you burst through the frenetic opening mission in the boots of foul-mouthed soldier Frank Woods, that much is abundantly clear. All of the familiar tropes are present: slow-motion sequences following door breaches, tightly-controlled battle areas adjoined by sparse corridors, and plenty of jargon-filled military exposition in between missions.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Nihilistic Software
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

The concept behind the game's narrative is that the top-secret *Black Ops* files have been opened, and you're delving into the history of the aforementioned Woods and his brother-in-arms, Alex Mason – two individuals who will be instantly familiar to fans of the home console *Black Ops* titles. Each mission is self-contained, and locations range all over the globe. One sees you liberating captured analysts in the Far East, while another focuses on a botched intel exchange in a snow-covered town, with your source receiving a sniper's bullet through the cranium within seconds of the mission starting.

However, while *Black Ops Declassified* happily globetrots to a multitude of different locations, the excitement level rarely comes along for ride. The game is curiously muted and largely devoid of the grandiose set pieces that make the home console editions so arresting. For the most part, you merely funnel from one part of the tightly-controlled map to another, picking off repetitive enemies, reloading your ammo and occasionally partaking in some slow-mo blasting. You are locked into this cycle of repetition for around an hour, at which point the credits roll.

FOR THE MOST PART, YOU MERELY FUNNEL FROM ONE PART OF THE MAP TO THE OTHER

Incredibly, *Black Ops Declassified*'s solo campaign can be finished in a single sitting. Missions themselves rarely last more than a few minutes, and their brevity is acknowledged by the fact that there are no mid-level checkpoints. Fall to your knees in a hail of enemy fire within sight of the final objective and you have to return to the beginning of the level and start all over again. On the early stages it's merely a mild annoyance, but on the later levels, where

FAQs

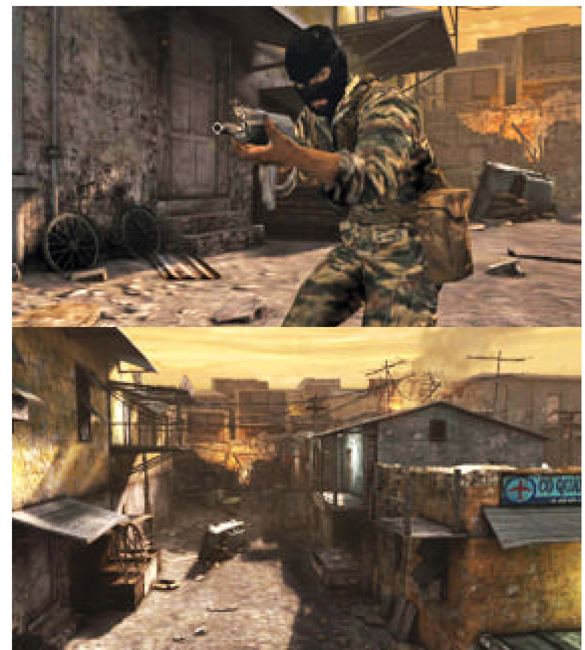
Q. IS SINGLE-PLAYER REALLY AN HOUR LONG?
Sadly, yes. Might take a little longer if you're less skilled, though. Maybe?

Q. HOW DOES THE STORY TIE IN WITH THE OTHER GAMES?
Black Ops Declassified is very much a side story, but it's set in between the first and second *Black Ops* games.

Q. IS THERE A ZOMBIES MODE?
Not at present, although the developer has suggested it could come later.



Right: Visually, *Black Ops Declassified* is quite basic and lacks the visual flair we've come to expect from the home console instalments in the series.



Below: The Vita's twin sticks provide the perfect control setup. It's just a shame the game isn't more interesting.

the numerical advantage your opponents enjoy borders on downright unfair at times, it becomes far more frustrating. Even so, if you're a player of moderate skill the game will gladly surrender its secrets within the space of a day, and aside from a mode that allows you to run solo around multiplayer maps, all you're left with is the online component to justify your investment.

Thanks to a large downloadable patch that improves the online performance, multiplayer *Black Ops Declassified* is much more enjoyable than it was at launch. A selection of four-on-four challenges are available, comprising Team Deathmatch, Kill Confirmed, Drop Zone, Team Tactical and Free-For-All. From a technical perspective, the system is robust enough, although occasional lag and random dropouts do occur. This is arguably the section of *Black Ops Declassified* where most people will spend their time, but it lacks the bombast of its home console brethren. Maps feel restrictive and too compact, making repeat play something of a chore. It's hard to see any reason why dedicated fans would chose this over the online mode of *Modern Warfare 3* or *Black Ops II*.

It goes without saying that *Black Ops Declassified* doesn't offer value for money. At £45 it's as expensive as *Black Ops II*, yet it offers only a fraction of the enjoyment. Largely devoid of gripping spectacle and thrilling narrative, it instead prefers to line up a series of short, unconnected missions, which are wrapped up in a baffling and near-incoherent storyline. Despite Woods and Mason, it never feels like the game is linked with the other *Black Ops* titles, and rarely do you get the impression that you're gaining an insight into the characters of these hardened warriors. They're there to lend the game a little gravitas and to spout a few obscenities to ensure it earns that all-important Mature rating.

Developer Nihilistic has since recently confirmed that it is rebranding as nStigate Games and is ditching physical retail altogether. While it's tempting to suggest that the overwhelmingly negative critical reaction to this rather lacklustre Vita title is the reason for the studio's cathartic rebirth, the choice was clearly made long before the scathing reviews started to trickle in. Even so, *Black Ops Declassified* is a sorry way to end 14 years of coding history at Nihilistic. The kindest thing you can say about it is that it's a reasonably authentic facsimile of the *Call Of Duty* blueprint, yet it feels like the work of an artist painstakingly tracing a masterpiece but lacks the craft to replicate the magical that made the original so attractive in the first place.

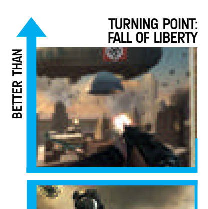
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TOUCH ME: *Black Ops Declassified* makes limited use of the system's touch-sensitive panels. Melee attacks are accessed via the front screen, while the rear pad can be used to steady your aim when sniping.

HISTORY LESSON

Although *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* pushes its narrative into the near future and contains all kinds of awesome gadgets and weapons, *Black Ops Declassified* is very much rooted in the past. Like the original *Black Ops*, it focuses on secret missions in war-torn regions and stars the dynamic duo of Frank Woods and Alex Mason. Woods was a peripheral character in the first *Black Ops* game, and returns in the sequel in a supporting role. While *Declassified*'s attempt at fleshing out the stories of these individuals is noble, it fumbles the chance; you don't know them any better at the end than you did at the start.

BETTER THAN — TURNING POINT: FALL OF LIBERTY



WORSE THAN — CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

VERDICT 4/10
THESE FILES SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN OPENED

SUMO DIGITAL PUSHES THE PEDAL TO THE METAL WITH SUPERSONIC RESULTS

Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed

In the seemingly cutthroat world of videogame development, nostalgia is a powerful and liberally used weapon. It's often coupled with a mechanically average framework, as by masking a lack of originality behind the gloss of something that used to be held in higher esteem, it's easier to trick the masses into buying something soulless. But if you're a discerning gamer who's played through a console generation or five, you'll probably feel like you can spot one of these cash-ins coming a mile off. We know we can, and that's why *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* is all the more surprising.

As a follow-up to 2010's mediocre *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, this new and much-improved kart racer feels like the work of a different team. Sumo Digital is still the developer on the box, but by hiring creative talent from the late Bizarre Creations and Black Rock Studio, the team has crafted a game that could survive a rendition of *Fastest Thing Alive* without melting under the pressure. And if you have any love for Sega games past or present, the avalanche of nostalgia on offer is a welcome blessing.

While the first game kept the racing on solid ground, *Transformed*'s titular turnaround is the inclusion of boat and plane sections in addition to the established karting. The transformation process doesn't require any input from the player as you switch between land, sea and air automatically, but unlike the more gimmicky implementation of hang-gliders and amphibious driving in *Mario Kart 7*, Sumo has tailored the vehicles with flair and distinction. This is especially true of the *Wave Race*-inspired boat physics, because rather than coasting along on calm seas, you're encouraged to perform tricks off the waves before boosting ahead.

The art of chaining power slides together for a meatier boost bonus is just as fun as it ever was, but instead of drifting through the sneaky short cuts and then repeating the process three times in scripted succession, some circuits now dynamically change between laps. The *Burning Rangers* track, for instance, takes place in an aquatic complex that slowly submerges, while on the *Nights*-inspired Dream Valley, the first two laps take you through a different dream before you finally come face to face with Wizeman the Wicked himself. It's almost like playing a rally-style kart game, as the repetition is kept to a refreshing minimum.

This heightened inventiveness explains why *Transformed* only has 21 tracks, including four recycled and one limited edition exclusive, when compared to *Sega All-Stars*' 24, because in terms of variety, there is much more game here for the money. It also pays homage to a wider pool of source material, as whether you're flying Joe Musashi through an *After Burner*-style aircraft carrier or driving up the drawbridge of Death Adder's Lair while listening to a modern remix of the

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: 360, 3DS, iOS, PC, PS Vita, Wii U
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sumo Digital
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: By collecting the tokens that appear on the tracks, you can spend your loose change in the pre-race slot machine. The benefits of this are minor, but there's nothing quite like speeding off the starting line with a sneaky hotrod.





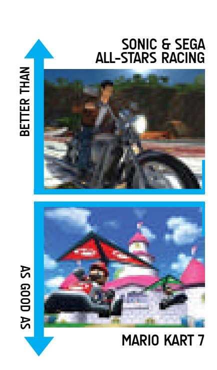
Above: The planes are the easiest vehicles to pilot as you simply have to guide them through the boost rings while avoiding enemy fire, and although it takes longer to fly upwards, you'll gain a significant speed boost whenever you nosedive.

Right: In traditional karting fashion, completing all the tracks in Grand Prix mode will unlock their mirrored alternatives.

THE GAME HITS ALL THE NOSTALGIC EROGENOUS ZONES WHILE LOOKING AND SOUNDING FANTASTIC IN THE PROCESS

FURTHER READING: SONIC & SEGA ALL-STARS RACING | REVIEW | ISSUE 93 | PAGE 124





FAQs

Q. HOW'S THE MUSIC?
Richard Jacques has done an outstanding job of remixing classic beats like the catchy *Burning Rangers* theme.

Q. BEST NEW RACER?
Invest the time and you'll unlock something that, for our money, is Sega's answer to the talking Game Boy from *Captain N*.

Q. ANY BLUE SHELL SYNDROME?
The new Wasp Swarms will target the pack leaders, but they can be avoid with skilful driving, so no.

SPEED FREAKS

Just like the first game, *Transformed* won't let you pick the same character as another player, and while we understand this is probably due to balancing reasons – nobody wants to take part in a race that's inevitably made up of nothing but Sonic and Shadow clones – it's no less annoying when you enter a matchmaking lobby only to find that your pick of the litter has already been claimed. It's a problem that's somewhat mitigated once you unlock all the characters and performance mods, but as an enforced design choice, it reminds us of the early *Mario Kart* days where everybody wanted to pick Koopa Troopa or Toad but couldn't. Suffice to say that Nintendo eventually changed this for a reason.



classic *Golden Axe* beat, the game hits all the nostalgic erogenous zones while looking and sounding fantastic in the process.

Comparatively, the two guest characters are more hit and miss, as although Wreck-It Ralph is a fairly obvious fit, the inclusion of Danica Patrick is more of an eyebrow-raiser. She doesn't harm the game in any way, but rather than a real-life NASCAR driver, it's arguable that the 22nd character slot would have been better served by a standard Badnik. But when it comes to the wholesome mix of nailing the perfect corner, boosting through an item box and then tagging an opponent with the new Ice Shot pickup before stealing pole position, *Transformed* speeds alongside the best of the genre.

If there's one area where it pulls slightly ahead, however, it's the depth of single-player content. While *Mario Kart* has always been content with Grand Prix and Time Attack, *Transformed* ups the solo stakes with World Tour mode. It's no more sophisticated than a gauntlet of 48 events that include everything from simple races and drift challenges to a *Burnout*-style Traffic Attack mode, where you have to weave between cars against the clock, and yet in terms of the quintessential challenge factor, the full-fat Expert difficulty will give even the most decorated wheelman cause to swear profusely. Or at least it did in our case.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

FASTER, STRONGER: While the first game was fairly stable when taken online, the new and improved netcode here does a better job of keeping the interference of lag to an acceptable minimum.

There are no guaranteed game-changers like the infamous Blue Shells, although it's possible for a losing player to gain ground with the returning All-Star moves. But perhaps more than any other karting game we've played in recent memory, *Transformed* bridges the gap between instant accessibility and high-level mastery. It's something that quickly becomes apparent when you leave the single-player distractions and roll onto the online circuit, as whether you're putting your rating on the line in the intense races or dodging heat-seeking drones and unguided fireworks in one of the four arenas, the most skilful driver is invariably the one who wins.

There are no cheap shots and you'll feel like you've earned every victory, and when another player finishes ten seconds ahead of you, the drive to up your game is one that's hard to resist. So is *Transformed* the new king of karting? It all comes down to personal preference, but the fact that Sumo has made it a two-horse race is just about the highest praise we can think of. And in those moments where you fly through the skies of Arcadia or come face to face with a dragon from *Panzer Dragoon*, it's refreshing to think that sometimes, just sometimes, gaming nostalgia can be a very good thing.

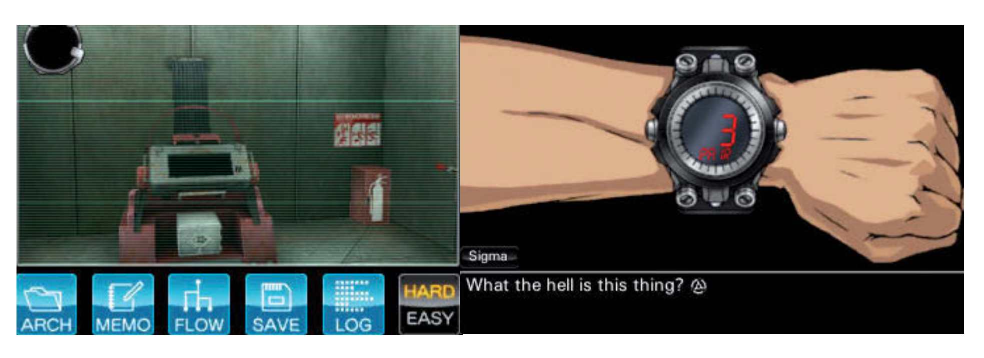


NO LONGER IN THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR

DO YOU WANT TO PLAY A GAME? A READING GAME?

Virtue's Last Reward

Below: Much of the game is spent reading or listening, but the puzzles are intriguing. You're stuck in a room in first-person, and must gather clues on how to escape. It's like a combination of a point-and-click and *Professor Layton*, but with more death.



Apart from having one of the oddest names in gaming history, *Virtue's Last Reward* is also the sequel to cult classic *999: Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*, one of the first 'visual novels' to get an English translation and a Western release. If you've never experienced a visual novel, it's a fancy way of describing a game that has a hell of a lot of text and not a lot of gameplay. So if that sounds immediately unappealing, this probably isn't for you.

We're not here to define what is or what isn't a game, though, and there's no mistaking *Virtue's Last Reward*'s quality. Ostensibly, it's a Japanese version of *Saw* or *The Cube*, but instead of horrendous limb-letting, there's a psychotic rabbit called Zero and an ensemble of oddball characters, all of whom are stuck in a maniacal game of death where the only escape is through puzzle-solving.

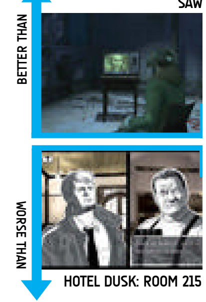
It starts in an elevator, with only a few clues on how to escape, all of which boil down to *Layton*-lite logic puzzles and some point-and-click item-combining. Once you, and the girl you're stuck in there with, are out, the story begins. And continues. And continues to continue. The Japanese aren't exactly well known for their economy of words, but this is something else. Even with a slick English translation and plenty of puns, the need to explain every minute detail of the story and the mechanics of the 'nonary game' – the game of death in question – mean it becomes a drag.

Thankfully, when it's not busy overexplaining itself, *Virtue's Last Reward* is pretty interesting. The characters need to escape through the number 9 door in the rabbit's twisted warehouse, and to do so need to gain a specific number of points on their wristwatches, which double as *Battle Royale*-style death devices. At certain times, the different pairs of characters can choose to ally with or betray each other, with the various outcomes leading to different numbers of points. At each allegiance or betrayal, the story splits, and you can replay other sections or make different choices. It's a unique structure that appeals to the completists out there. If you can't handle Lynchian mystery and need answers in your storytelling, this is for you.

Ultimately, *Virtue's Last Reward* relies on the quality of its characterisation and dialogue to pull you through its adequate puzzle sequences, and you will spend more time reading than playing, but it's unquestionably one of the most unusual and interesting games on the Vita. If you're prepared to eschew a typical gaming challenge in favour of something more thoughtful and considered, *Virtue's Last Reward* is an excellent side dish to this Christmas's high-calorie delights.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Chunsoft
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TALK TALK: Unlike *999*'s slow text crawl, characters in *Virtue's Last Reward* speak their lines. Anyone who's capable of scan reading might want to skip through, though.

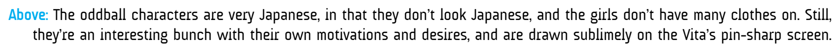


VERDICT 7/10

INTERESTING AND REWARDING, BUT HEAVY ON TEXT







Above: The oddball characters are very Japanese, in that they don't look Japanese, and the girls don't have many clothes on. Still, they're an interesting bunch with their own motivations and desires, and are drawn sublimely on the Vita's pin-sharp screen.

NINTENDO PROVES ONCE AGAIN THAT BLOCKS DO MATTER

Fallblox

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £7.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SPEEDTHRU: POTZOL'S PUZZLE

AS GOOD AS
PULLBLOX

It's time to invest in a new stylus or five, as Intelligent Systems returns with a fearsomely smart follow-up to the eShop's finest game to date. *Fallblox* is another spatial puzzler that will have you chewing your stylus with alarming regularity. Far from a simple sequel, it completely revamps the first game's systems to provide another excellent test of your mental acuity. And this time, it removes the training wheels much earlier.

The main link to the previous game comes in the rotund form of protagonist Mallo. This time, he's tasked with solving a problem of his own making, as his attempt to impress the granddaughter of mentor Papa Blox ends with him scaring away a flock of rare birds. Naturally, they seek refuge atop a series of structures made from irregular shapes, which makes Mallo the ideal candidate to rescue them.

Where the first game asked you to pull and push its structures to form a stairway to the top of the level, this time you have single-layer shapes that need to be manoeuvred into position. The catch is that they'll fall if unsupported, so you need to consider the effect that pulling and pushing them will have before you even start. In other words, you'll need to plan ahead simply to get off the ground, let alone to reach the summit.

Early levels offer the briefest of text clues, while the watchful Papa Blox will remain to offer further hints, alerting you whenever you've made a move that makes completion impossible. As before, you can rewind for quite a while to rectify any errors and leap on a button to reset the structure to its original form. It's a handy way of alleviating frustration in a game that takes a little longer to get your head around than its more immediate predecessor, though soon you're left to your own devices.

The two-star conundrums in *Pullblox* were a doddle to solve; here, you'll be pondering your next move even before new gadgets are introduced, from directional arrows to cloud platforms that remain airborne. The puzzles might look simpler in design, but they're much harder in execution, and their completion brings about a similar feeling of satisfaction and achievement to constructing a piece of flat-pack furniture without instructions.

In some respects, *Fallblox* is a fairly safe sequel – aesthetically, it's near-identical – but how many puzzle titles shake up the previous game's mechanics so thoroughly and so effectively? *Fallblox* is an intoxicating blend of the familiar and the new, every bit as essential as *Pullblox*, and a further reminder that Intelligent Systems remains one of the most aptly named developers in the business.

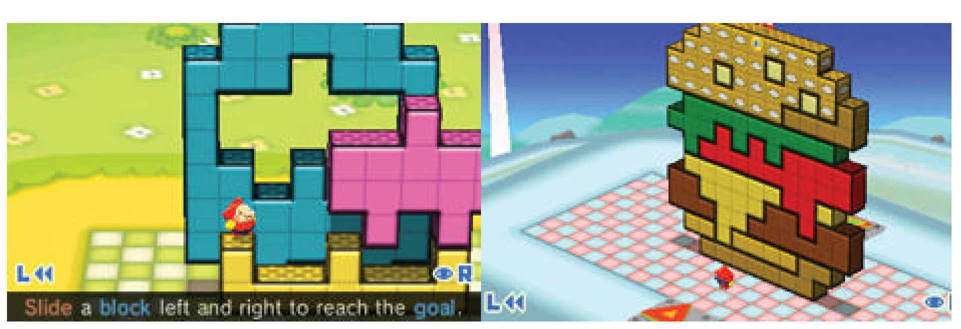


Above: Zooming out is useful for seeing how your actions affect the larger structures. The ability to rotate the camera is essential, not least because you'll often have to make your way up from the back.

Bullet Bill

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CRACK THE CODE: Again, there's a creation suite that allows you to build your own puzzles. Once it's confirmed solvable, you can share it with other 3DS players via QR codes.



Above: Tellingly, even from as early as the second set of puzzles, you're given the opportunity to skip to the next stage if you're stuck. Though do so and Papa Blox will chide you, suggesting you need more training before moving on.



ANOTHER CLASSIC HEAD-SCRATCHER FOR THE ESHOP

Left: To be fair to *Legends*, if you are the sort of person who can put up with a lot of repetitive, often broken rubbish, there's more than enough game here to keep you going for a long time.

Right: On the furtive first few glances at the game, you may be tempted to be drawn in, to be suckered into thinking this is 'proper' *Borderlands* in your hands. It's not. *Legends* looks nice, but it plays like a dog.

IT'S NOT ALWAYS GOOD THINGS COMING OUT OF PANDORA

Borderlands Legends

The main *Borderlands* series has complaints aimed at it that it is boring, at least by its detractors. It is a slog, they say, and it is not an involving experience that can be enjoyed by all. It would be interesting to see what these folks think of *Borderlands Legends*: one of the most uninvolving, boring and downright bad games we have ever played on iOS or any other format. Congratulations on attempting to sully the franchise with this dross, 2K.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves – let's start at the beginning. This is a top-down shooter based on the *Borderlands* series, featuring the original four characters from the first game. It combines elements of said top-down shooting and a smidge of tower defence to make a hybrid genre that packs in a lot of the stats and loot of the main series. It's a great idea on paper. It's a terrible idea on touchscreen.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: China
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: 2K China
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

GUN BROS

WORSE THAN



WORSE THAN

BORDERLANDS 2

The action itself rarely wanders beyond being boring and uninvolved. We genuinely beat more than one boss character by not moving and simply activating power-ups and buffs through the battle. While some levels will demand you move the squad into range of enemies on cliffs, generally everything comes to you.

But that could be taken as a good thing, as the controls in *Borderlands Legends* are a joke. Fiddly and imprecise is one thing, but when it's compounded by characters who out and out ignore your commands – instead of going to an area they stand still, for example – it becomes a real problem for the player, and as a result for the game. If anything, it starts to feel like something of a saving grace that you rarely have to move your characters.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MANY HANDS: Removing multiplayer from *Borderlands* is like taking the smirk from the *Mona Lisa*: stupid, wrong, ruinous and quite possibly a crime in many courts. We're not sure on the last part.

And that's before we even get to the glitches and bugs, from your squad getting stuck in rocks to enemies that just… well, stand there. Maybe they've given up hope, just as you likely will on playing *Legends* for any extended period of time.

The problems even extend to things like inventory management, with bizarre decisions like being able to 'buy and equip' weapons but not shields, and a seriously limited feel to the arsenal on offer.

Maybe the game didn't have to be so bad – there are times when it comes together and you realise that you are indeed having some amount of fun. Maybe it wouldn't have been such a letdown had there not been so many elements combining to bring the entirety of *Legends* down. Maybe if it wasn't a buggy – near enough broken at times – crock we could be more forgiving towards it. But it isn't. It is what it is, and *Borderlands Legends* is just plain bad.


VERDICT 3/10

BORDERS ON BEING LEGENDARILY BAD

LET'S HUNT SOME BLOCKS

Lego The Lord Of The Rings

Below: Perhaps *Lego Lord Of The Rings*' greatest achievement is the sense of adventure it creates. One friend of **games™** was so taken with it that he suggested TT Games' next should be *Lego Stand By Me*. Sounds like a winner to us.



With TT Games' latest representing the 275th (approx) *Lego* crossover this generation, it would be easy to be bored, even cynical about its endeavours. Oh, there's another *Lego* game? What is it this time? *Lego Does Dallas*? *Lego Crank*?

Well, it would be easy if TT's work wasn't – with rare exception – so appealing. In some cases, this being one, its games are the best representation of the respective universes in gaming. Like its predecessors, there are flaws. But *Lego LOTR*'s brilliance is in reminding older players why they loved the source material so much, as well as appealing to audiences that are too young to have Aragorn duvet covers. Given *The Lord Of The Rings*' penchant for limb/head severance, that's no mean feat. The series' trademark humour works well to disguise the underlying nastiness. Boromir being pierced with a banana and a broom instead of arrows, for example.

Likewise, TT's filtering of Tolkien/Jackson's world through the Lego-ometor retains the majesty of the films' scope and direction, while giving room to put its own stamp on proceedings. With three films, 80 characters, a free play mode, a blacksmith's shop that enables you to enhance your character, and a bundle of side quests to indulge in, *Lego LOTR* is as good a fan service as you can get.

Sadly, old problems remain. The game is fundamentally fiddly; everything from changing character to putting items in their respective slots is counter-intuitive and irritating, especially mid-fight. Instead of simply pressing B to pick up an item you need right there and then, you have to faff around with slot-based busywork. Switching characters is also a mess, requiring the use of either a cumbersome radial wheel or some iffy on-the-fly switching. The camera, too, isn't always up to scratch. It can be poorly implemented and infuriating, especially when an enemy or puzzle piece is just out of view. There's no online co-op, which is borderline insane. Finally, the overly prescribed nature of play might grate on those who want a bit more freedom.

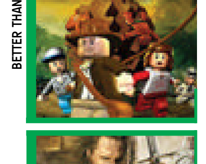
It's testament to TT's skill, then, that this laundry list of faults isn't anywhere near enough to derail the experience. *Lego LOTR* successfully retains the films' awesome sense of adventure, thanks to the well-crafted, class-focused Lego environments feeding into the game's inherent co-op nature. And, it must be added, the films' score goes a long way.

The sheer amount of content on offer is certain to please fans, as well as those who want to smash bricks or solve rudimentary puzzles, and to experience whatever amount of crossover there is between them. *Lego LOTR*'s authenticity is matched only by the amount of content on offer, and it's a must for those who love the films or play regularly with younger gamers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS, DS, PC, PS3, PS Vita, Wii
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: TT Games
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: LEGO INDIANA JONES



WORSE THAN: BEING PART OF THE FELLOWSHIP



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

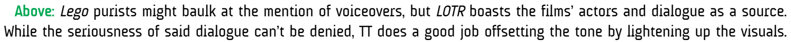
ONLINE PLAY: Come on, now. We're living in the future. Online play should be a prerequisite for the *Lego* franchise at this point, even if the games are at their best in local co-op.



VERDICT 7/10

A FUNNY, AUTHENTIC TAKE ON TOLKIEN'S WORLD





Above: *Lego* purists might baulk at the mention of voiceovers, but *LOTR* boasts the films' actors and dialogue as a source. While the seriousness of said dialogue can't be denied, TT does a good job offsetting the tone by lightening up the visuals.



Below: Stages like the Fantastic Four's Baxter Building, the prehistoric Savage Land and SWORD's space station The Peak are taken directly from the pages of the comics. It's just a shame there are so few to choose from.





THE ULTIMATE TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISE

Marvel Avengers: Battle For Earth

In recent months, it's been more apparent than ever that popular culture is hell bent on eating itself. It's a never-ending glut of movies based on toys, toys based on books, books based on TV shows and games based on all of the above. Movie game tie-ins are often derided as the most soulless of this sorry bunch, and while *Marvel Avengers: Battle For Earth* doesn't entirely fly in the face of preconceptions, it at least attempts to. That's got to count for something when it could have just contented itself as the next in line to an endless procession of bloated and bland gaming cash cows.

Though created to tie in with the film franchise, *Battle For Earth* takes the majority of its cues directly from the comic books, specifically the 2008 'Secret Invasion' story arc by Brian Michael Bendis. Using Kinect's motion-based controls, players can control up to 20 characters from the Marvel universe as they try to halt a global invasion by shape-shifting alien race the Skrull. Disguised Skrull sleeper agents have also infiltrated the ranks of Earth's mightiest heroes, a premise that gives this brightly coloured brawler the perfect excuse to pit good guys against other good guys and the bad guys against, well, everyone.

Though the game clearly has respect and affection for the source material, the campaign isn't afforded much in the way of a story. Despite the wealth of inspiration to draw from, only a few still comic book panels and lines of voiceover tie stages together. The main attraction is the gesture-based combat, and luckily there are plenty of additional modes to complete, a versus and co-op feature that allows you to play with or against friends, and costumes and cards to unlock. The fighting itself is surprisingly satisfying at first. Each character has three unique moves that can be strung together to create combos, and performing these will fill a gauge that can then be used to initiate breakers and powerful ultra moves.

There are some nice touches, such as shouting character-specific phrases to receive damage boosts, but the problem that quickly becomes apparent is that the heroes are tactically identical, with any complexity in their unique actions and Kinect's ability to recognise them providing the only real variation and challenge in the entire experience. Having so few unique attacks per character simply highlights this issue, and though individual matches are well paced, the campaign soon becomes a tiresome, repetitive and gimmicky slog. There are plenty of good ideas in *Battle For Earth*, but it's clear that it has been restricted in what it can offer and ultimately accomplish by its very nature as a motion-based fighter.

Though an overall shallow affair, *Battle For Earth* displays a lot more polish, flair and finesse than your average tie-in, but like those Skrull impostors, it can't escape its true, uglier nature for too long.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Quebec
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

KINECT STAR WARS



JUST LIKE



THE GUNSTRINGER

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SECRET IDENTITIES: It might have been refreshing to see some lesser-known Avengers. Sure, Magneto and Loki are flavours of the moment, but Vision, Stature or even Iron Fist deserve a look in too.





VERDICT 6/10

SOME ASSEMBLY STILL REQUIRED

GETS THE FORMULA RIGHT BUT LITTLE ELSE

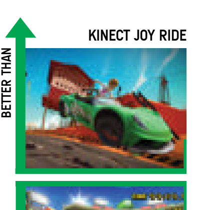
F1 Race Stars

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

KINECT JOY RIDE





WORSE THAN

MARIO KART WII

As a certain popular television programme loves to remind us at this time of the year, if you want to make it big, you've got to have the x-factor. You've got to have that certain je ne sais quoi that makes you stand out, that makes hairs on the backs of necks stand up, that induces a giddiness and excitement unlike anything else. *F1 Race Stars* gets a lot right but, sadly, it's missing that x-factor.

The gimmicky concept is the biggest success. Stuffing the F1 licence into a karting-shaped hole seems like an awkward fit, and yet by transforming F1 drivers into cute, chibi-esque alternate versions, it injects them with the one thing they otherwise lack: personality. This extends to the tracks, which have leaps over chasms, desert tornadoes, loop-the-loops and high, gravity-defying corners.

There's a subtle F1 theme at work in the gameplay systems too. Blue sections of the track allow you to charge up your KERS if you let go of the accelerator before putting your foot down again. It's nothing more than an appropriate name for an unusual turbo boost, but thematically it works. The more successful power-ups also take cues from the sport. One example is the safety car, which limits the speed of the top driver and prevents him from overtaking.

What *F1 Race Stars* lacks is any gameplay hook beyond its cute concept. There's no real depth to cornering – not like the beautifully nuanced powersliding seen in *Mario Kart* or even *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* – and thus, the only meaningful battles for position outside of weapons is done via slipstreaming. It's too situational to feel anything other than opportunistic, however, and so, when there's no action from nearby cars, *F1 Race Stars* quickly begins to feel dull.

This leaves weapons having to pick up the slack, and this is where *F1 Race Stars* really struggles. While the function of each offensive power-up is recognisable – homing rockets, bouncing rockets, mines – they don't have the impact they should. The bland implementation is part of the problem. Homing rockets, for example, aren't rockets but rather red bubbles. The bouncing rockets aren't rockets but yellow bubbles. Mines? Blue bubbles.

Perhaps the thought of a cartoon rocket slamming into the back of Lewis Hamilton's head terrified the FIA and red bubbles were considered the friendlier version, but it's a problem that extends to what happens when the weapons connect. Instead of any major impact, cars are picked up by that bubble before being dropped back on the track. It's tame and doesn't make battles the events they should be. It's too sedate, too limp. It's a shame that while *F1 Race Stars* has successfully aped most of the key ingredients needed to make a successful multiplayer game – vibrant personality, fun tracks, strong multiplayer – it's missing that x-factor to make it stand apart. Competent, then, but ultimately not a contender.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

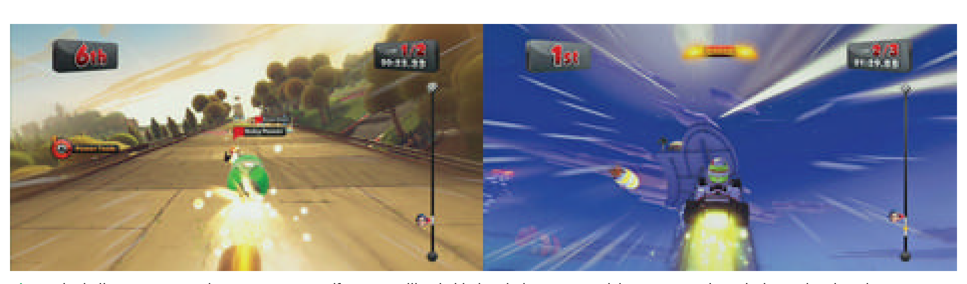
F1 THEME: With pit stops, KERS, raincloud power-ups and safety cars, Codemasters has done a good job of making sure this karting game fits with the Formula 1 theme.



Above: There are three different speed categories and it can be tough winning, thanks to the rubber-banding and abundance of power-ups that keep you from inching too far ahead.

Below: The cute versions of real-life drivers are recognisable, if somewhat creepy, with a few fictional female drivers to add diversity to the testosterone-fest.





Above: The bullet power-up makes an appearance if you're trailing behind and gives you a quick way to cut through the pack. Otherwise, mounting comebacks is a surprisingly boring affair.

VERDICT 6/10

DOES THE BASICS BUT LACKS THAT SOMETHING SPECIAL



Left: In reality, hands glitch through wands and indeed the book at times, each instance putting another chink in an illusion destined at some point to be shattered. Well, for older gamers, at least.

WHAT IS THE SECRET OF YOUR POWER?

Wonderbook: Book Of Spells

Here's the crazy thing about *Book Of Spells* – if you could travel back in time just 20 years or so and demo it, people would readily believe that this *was* magic. But in this cynical modern age, people waste no time blowing away the smoke and smashing the mirrors to reveal the illusionist's secret – that this is just a bog-standard webcam picking out designated objects in its field of vision and replacing them with fantastical objects in the video stream it feeds back. Technically, it's far deeper than that, we know. But you get the point. If you're too old or jaded to suspend disbelief – and for no longer than you do when you're pretending to be Lance Corporal Shooty McWarman, either – *Wonderbook* and its debut release isn't for you.

Despite the fact that the PlayStation Eye's resolution means it isn't really up to the task of painting backdrops for convincing augmented reality illusions, *Book Of Spells* is so drenched in *Potter* lore and audience participation that it's easy to be suckered in all the same. There's little game to speak of here, at least in the traditional sense. It's an augmented reality magic crash course, Move your wand as you shout nonsensical incantations at the TV and paint pretty shapes on the sky to pretend you're more than your regular Muggle self. Spells are taught, stories are told, and that's about it. End-of-chapter challenges piece all your new-found wandcraft together in unobjectionable challenges, but that's about as close as *Book Of Spells* ever comes to being a 'proper' game.

Still, it's hard not to respect that. Games like *Fable: The Journey* are all the proof you should need that this level of gimmickry can't support a full game in the traditional sense, so this Hogwarts experience – something more refined and focused on the things it knows it can do well, even at the expense of longevity and depth – is by far the preferable option. For *Potter* fans, it's a glorious and utterly absorbing take on the magical, certainly far better than the flailing attempts of the Kinect games. Spell motions are picked up reliably, assuming the conditions are correct – the camera needing to see both book pages and Move controller can confuse matters – and the augmented on-screen view of the play area pulls some very clever tricks to get you to buy into it.

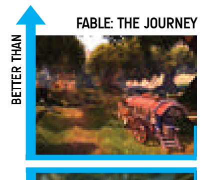
It's quite frustrating, then, to see Sony whip its dick out on the first date like this. The book may simply be a bundle of fancy AR cards for the camera to read, but there can't be a stronger brand, audience considered, for this gimmick to be applied to, so it's a worry that *Wonderbook* may have nowhere left to go after this relatively strong debut. Still, the tech, while far from perfect, will be enough to provoke numerous double-takes from younglings, who will doubtless love this extremely clever, if limited, application of practical science. Sorry, magic.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

FABLE: THE JOURNEY





KINECTIMALS

AS GOOD AS

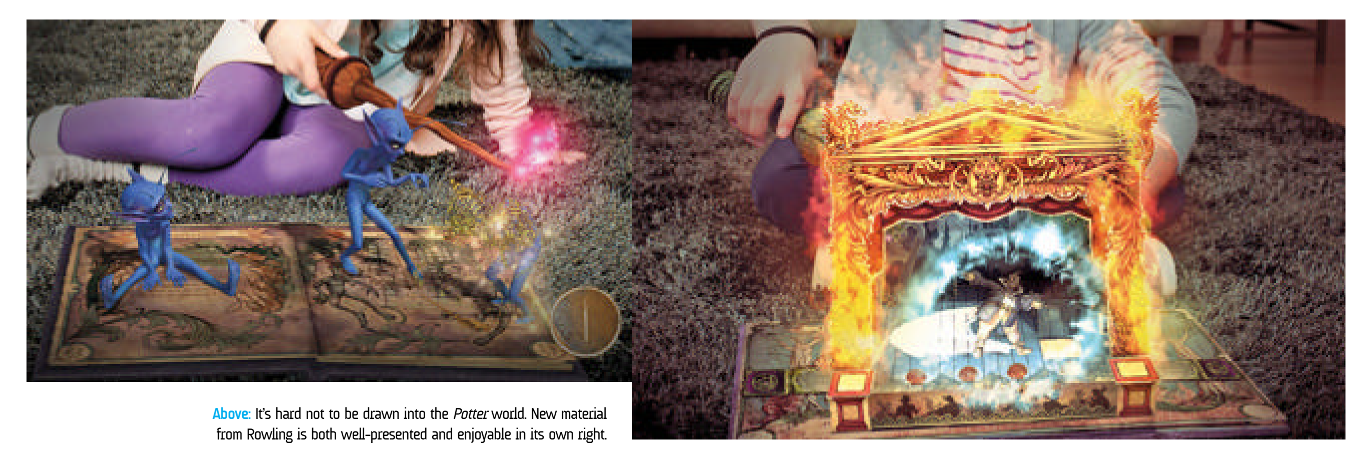
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TESTING, TESTING: End-of-chapter challenges bring all you've been taught together for one big magical throwdown. They're simple, but they're as close to a real game as *Book Of Spells* gets.

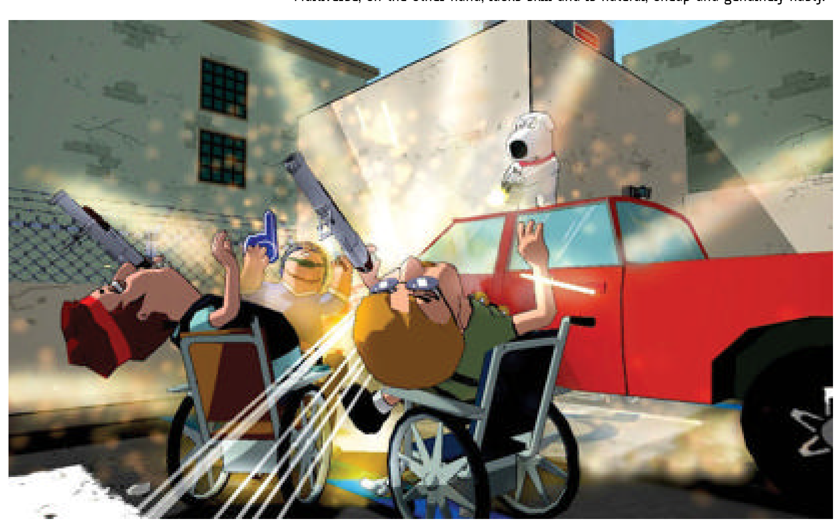
VERDICT 7/10

THE CLOSEST YOU'LL COME TO THE HOGWARTS ALUMNI



Above: It's hard not to be drawn into the *Potter* world. New material from Rowling is both well-presented and enjoyable in its own right.

Below: *South Park* manages to have heart and context in its offense. *Back To The Multiverse*, on the other hand, lacks skill and is hateful, cheap and genuinely nasty.





CAN WE ALL TRAVEL TO A UNIVERSE WHERE THIS GAME DOESN'T EXIST?

Family Guy: Back To The Multiverse

***Family Guy: Back To The Multiverse* is a third-person shooter with minor platform and puzzle elements.** It's like *Ratchet & Clank*, were that series to be terrible. It offers floaty, imprecise controls; bland, repetitive objectives; and serves as a total nothing in the pantheon of gaming experiences.

It's somewhat fortunate, then, that the game serving as the base of *Back To The Multiverse* is so bland, pointless and uneventful that we feel comfortable in glossing over it so quickly. Because there's something at work in this game that's so much worse. Something that turns it from a bad experience into one of the worst you're ever likely to have in a videogame.

It's offensive. Shocker, we know, what with it being based on *Family Guy*. But this is offensive in the wrong way. For all its many failings, the *Family Guy* TV show has skirted on the border between truly offensive and offensive for the sake of comedy. *Back To The Multiverse* skips past this line, travels a few miles further into 'obnoxiously hateful' territory and sets up camp there.

It's not that so-called 'offensive' comedy is bad. Far from it – when handled skilfully, it's good. When presented with context, with self-awareness and even as a vehicle to get across a greater message, the use of what many consider to be offensive is a powerful weapon in a comic's arsenal.

When you're calling almost everyone and everything in a game 'gay', 'queer' or a 'slut', when you're disparaging towards those of varying religious faiths for no reason other than that they're different, when a level has you gunning down legions of disabled people for no reason other than… well, no reason. God, even *Postal III* made more of an effort with its shock doctrine nonsense.

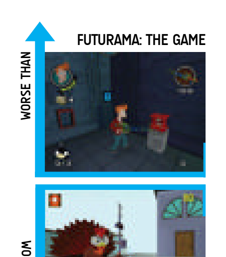
And it's not even necessarily the subject matter that makes it so sickening. There's a school of belief that everything can be made a joke of, or nothing can be made a joke of, and when things are managed carefully and with context it's hard to argue the logic. What is so sickening is the truly shocking laziness on the part of those making the game. There has been seemingly no effort at all gone into *Back To The Multiverse* as a gaming experience. It's a slap in the face to all fans of *Family Guy*. Everything from the controls right through to the structure is executed poorly, and it is one of the most genuinely insulting, vile and crassly offensive pieces of so-called entertainment we have ever seen.

On the other hand, if you are a fan of homophobia, racism, guilelessly mocking religions, contemptuous viewpoints on disability, sexism and genuinely lazy writing then you're in for a treat.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Heavy Iron Studios
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

WORSE THAN FUTURAMA: THE GAME

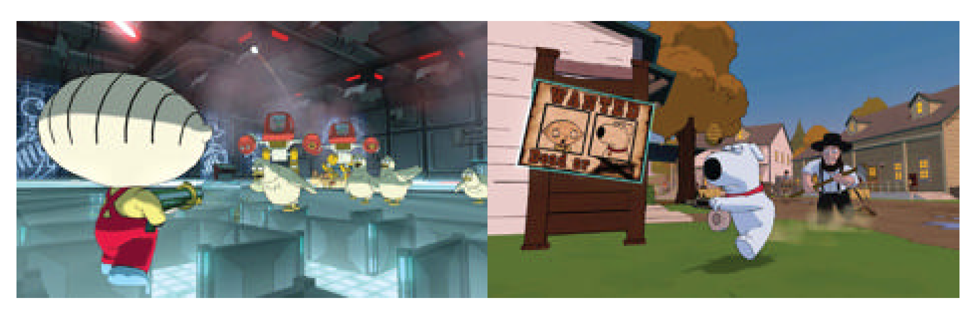


WORSE THAN SOUTH PARK: THE GAME

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EVERYTHING: We'd change the game, the look, the writing, but most of all the attitude. *Back To The Multiverse* is an insult to all *Family Guy* fans, past and present, as well as pretty much anyone else.





VERDICT 1/10

A GENUINELY UNPLEASANT AND HATEFUL LITTLE GAME

IT REALLY, REALLY ISN'T

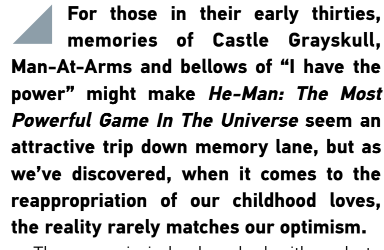
He-Man: The Most Powerful Game In The Universe

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Chillingo
DEVELOPER: Glitchsoft
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SWORD OF SODAN

WORSE THAN
CASTLE CRASHERS



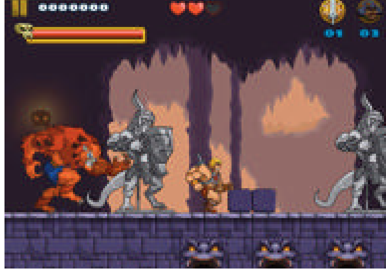
For those in their early thirties, memories of Castle Grayskull, Man-At-Arms and bellows of "I have the power" might make *He-Man: The Most Powerful Game In The Universe* seem an attractive trip down memory lane, but as we've discovered, when it comes to the reappropriation of our childhood loves, the reality rarely matches our optimism.

The game is indeed packed with nods to the Eighties toy line and cartoon. Villains such as Skeletor, Trap Jaw and Beast Man all make boss appearances, and Orko casts spells to revive you should you meet a grisly fate. Nevertheless, the game they're starring in does little to work the nostalgia gland up into anything other than a withered sputter.

Taking the form of a basic side-scroller with 27 levels, you slide your left thumb across the bottom left of the screen to move, and tap or slide upwards on the right to attack or jump. There's no great imagination to the levels or the enemies you face; this is, by and large, a button-bashing left-to-right smash-a-thon about as sophisticated as He-Man himself.

Below: You can activate the power of Grayskull to beef up He-Man for a short period of time, or call in Man-At-Arms to fire a few lasers at enemies using swipes across the screen.





You can unlock a variety of extra combat skills with crystals gained by defeating enemies or smashing boxes, but they're expensive. The chances of completing the game with all unlocked, and without having spent some of your real-life cash on them instead, is very slim indeed. *He-Man* may only cost 69p – and admittedly, you do get a good run for that – but to get the full experience you're going to have to shell out a bit more.

If you decide to do so, you'll be wasting your time. Nostalgia can be an intoxicating thing, but in the case of this outing it's not powerful enough to overcome the boring, run-of-the-mill design. Eternia? More like eternally dull.



VERDICT 3/10
DOESN'T HAVE THE POWER

TAP, AND THE WHOLE WORLD TAPS WITH YOU

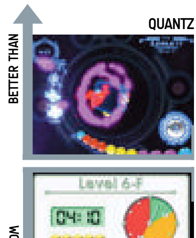
Curiosity: What's Inside The Cube?

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: 22Cans
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Many
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
QUANTZ

WORSE THAN
PICROSS 3D



Being gamers, we all have that little bit of compulsion inside us – the urge to strive for 100 per cent completion. It's that need to clear and diminish objectives as much as the core conundrum of what's actually inside that makes *Curiosity* a more compelling experience than your first taps may suggest.

The rules are simple. There's a large cube occupying your screen, comprised of an almost inconceivable number of smaller cubes. You and a worldwide host of allies/enemies must tap away at each cube to drill down to the centre and find the "life-changing" message tucked away inside.

Rhythmically tapping will build up combos, which are broken if you erringly tap the layer below the surface. With your high score displayed in the top left of the screen, the experience becomes a compelling, if simplistic, challenge against yourself; you'll likely find you speed up the rate of your taps or chip out various shapes and patterns just to see how dexterous your fingers really are.

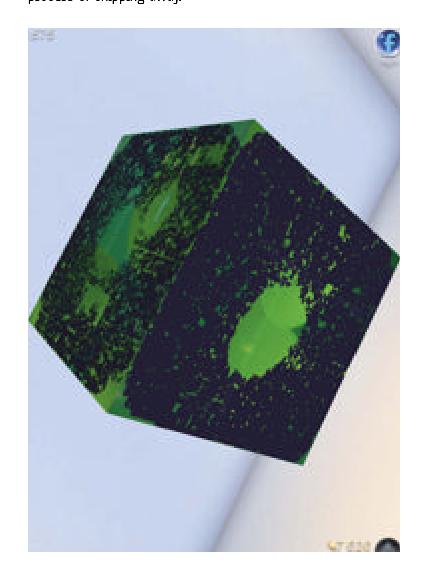
There are plenty of problems, the majority of which are related to poor network infrastructure. Often you'll be tapping away when, without warning, all blocks will disappear, presumably cleared away by another player and destroying your streak in the process. There are plenty of bugs too, such as shaky Facebook integration.

In concept, though, *Curiosity* succeeds. Devious in its simplicity, addictive in the satisfaction it rewards, and a compelling exploration into the human psyche. Make no mistake, it's an experiment as much as it is a game, and you're the hamster in the cage.

By the time this review is out, it's likely that the cube's secret will have been revealed, but just as interesting will be the metrics that tell the story of how gamers got there. Have no doubt that whatever those findings are, they will be incorporated into the design of the big game Molyneux has planned on the horizon.

VERDICT 6/10
CONUNDRUM, EXPERIMENT, GAME

Below: The points you earn from tapping can be spent on a variety of bombs and pickaxes – a whopping 3 billion for the diamond variety – that can speed up the otherwise slow process of chipping away.



THE MONSTER-MASHING ARCADE HIT ARRIVES IN FINE FORM ON WII U

Tank! Tank! Tank!

From the branching storylines of *The Walking Dead* to the prickly moral dilemmas of *Spec Ops: The Line* via the cinematic framing of *LA Noire*, today's developers continue to play with the storytelling possibilities of the medium, refining game narratives and offering complexity, subtlety and nuance. It's undoubtedly a good thing, but then it's equally refreshing in the current climate to play a game as no-nonsense as *Tank! Tank! Tank!* "A giant monster has been spotted at the wharf! Mobilise immediately and take it down!" shrieks your CO, and it turns out that's all the story and motivation you need: enemy, location, mission, go.

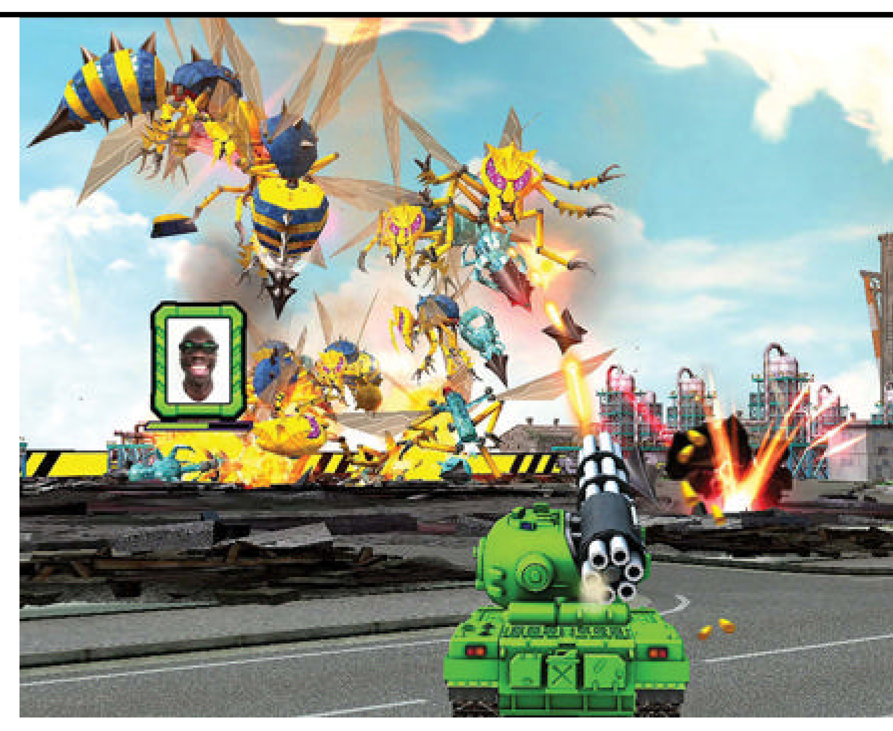
When you get there, there's very little to complicate your objective. You simply blast your enormous adversary to kingdom come and move onto the next. Controls are as basic as they come: you move around with the D-pad or thumbstick and use any button to fire – and just about any controller to do it, from old-style classic controllers to even the Wii Wheel. You can guide your turret independently, but only when you're stationary; instead the game automatically adjusts the height of your aim according to enemy positions while you simply point in the right direction.

Born in the arcade, *Tank! Tank! Tank!* feels oddly at home on a Nintendo console, perhaps thanks to the Kyoto company's unswerving focus on simple, accessible play mechanics presented in a bright and colourful manner. It looks old, it makes little meaningful use of the GamePad – bar one addition; more on that later – and there's unforgivable slowdown when the action is at its fiercest, but in the heat of battle it's hard to care too much.

Because, for all that it's repetitive, that irresistible conceit and its winning sense of campy fun carries it a long way. It helps that you have a wide range of tanks, each with three different weapon types: you begin with a standard, infinite-ammo cannon, but shooting enemies releases weapon pickups. Yellows are more powerful, offering a temporary boost to the damage you deal until you've emptied your new clip, while rare blue weapons are usually a one-shot deal that wreaks devastating damage – assuming you don't miss, of course. Some tanks are too feeble to bother with more than once, but it's enjoyable to experiment with a handful of different types. And you'll need to: the campaign periodically stalls you if you've been playing with the same one all the time, asking you to replay earlier stages to earn enough medals to unlock later challenges. Some will see this as a cheap way of extending a potentially slim lifespan, but

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: The colossus missile is a rare beast, but can take a huge chunk from a boss's life bar if it hits.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

PICTURE IMPERFECT: It's a shame the game doesn't ask to take more photos for reaction shots.
TWIN-STICK SHOOTER: The ability to control your turret independently would also be welcome.



Right: A second player can tackle Story Mission mode, but sadly they're lumbered with the default tank. It's a shame, but it's clearly to avoid the possibility of two overpowered panzers taking down the game's gargantuan enemies in record time.

FROM GIANT CENTIPEDES TO MOUNTAINOUS GOLEMS AND FLYING EYEBALLS, THE MISSION OBJECTIVES GET PROGRESSIVELY SILLIER

Left: Missions tend to alternate between one or two giant enemies and swarms of smaller (but still oversized) monsters.
Below: If you don't want to take a silly photo before every game, you'll be happy to note that any you've already taken are held in stock for future use.



BETTER THAN
STEEL BATTALION HEAVY ARMOR



WORSE THAN
GHOST SQUAD

FAQs

Q. REPLAY VALUE?
Plenty. You'll want to get S-ranks and beat your best times for each stage.

Q. HOW MANY TANKS?
More than you'll ever need. It takes a frightening number of medals to unlock the final one.

Q. IS THIS ANOTHER EDF?
Not quite, but you're in the right ballpark. Silly and surprisingly compelling arcade fun.

SMASH AND GRAB

On occasion, when fighting a larger enemy, it'll grab you in its mouth or between its tentacles and leave you unable to fight. You can jab buttons or the GamePad touchscreen to extricate yourself from its grasp, but in multiplayer you'll need to rely on your allies to shoot the monster quickly enough to free you. You're rewarded for a successful rescue, but failure means you'll be burnt to a crisp and lose one of your finite supply of tanks. Losing one of a stock of five is no great shakes, but losing valuable time is more problematic. Given how close to the wire many levels go, success or failure here can go a long way to determining the outcome of a stage.



allowing players to stick with one would only exacerbate the repetition. Besides, it's wise to have two or three options at your disposal, as your favourite tank might not be best-suited to the next mission. With faster-paced enemies, there's little use having a slow-moving vehicle, while if you're under attack from a monolithic beast firing deadly projectiles, a nippy tank with low armour is hardly the best option. It's not an ideal system, but surely preferable to sharp difficulty spikes to halt progress.

The action escalates beautifully. Though enemies occasionally repeat – you'll fight one or two familiar enemies in different colours – for the most part a new mission means a new monster. From giant centipedes to mountainous golems and flying eyeballs, the mission objectives get progressively sillier. Let's put it this way: it isn't too long before you're fighting on the surface of the moon.

If the campaign was all Namco had to offer, *Tank! Tank! Tank!* perhaps wouldn't quite justify its retail status; thankfully, a quartet of multiplayer modes seals the deal. The tank-centric free-for-all is a fittingly messy and hilarious brand of deathmatch: kill-stealing is rife, but games always end up incredibly close. Weapon pickups range from ludicrous nukes to a booby prize which makes your tank tiny and feeble, replacing the cannon with a water pistol Team battles are only marginally less frantic, while four players can also co-operate against monsters from the campaign. It's not a game that really allows efficiency, but attacking from several angles to confuse a large opponent adds a very light element of tactical play.

It's My Kong mode, however – the one game to really use the Wii U controller's capabilities beyond off-screen play – that is the undoubted highlight. Here, the GamePad player takes control of a giant robotic ape, attempting to survive an assault from three tanks by crushing them with a range of powerful moves that require a cooldown period before they can be reused. Again, it's frantic and clumsy and heartily daft, the gorilla firing weapons from his backside, or triggering a furious rampage when powered up. As with other modes, it's a crazy, ramshackle kind of spectacle, with buildings crumbling in an hysterically cheap way, while collision physics are awful. No, it isn't high art, but it's still great fun, and it's only made funnier by having everyone's face on the screen, framed in a silly wig, hat or outfit.

Tank! Tank! Tank! is a very easy game to criticise. It's technically poor, its repetitive mechanics are hardly helped by its campaign structure, and it makes scant use of its host console's broad feature set. But in many ways, it's Wii U's *Ghost Squad*: an arcade hit efficiently translated to console, with a few shortcomings that mean it can't quite match the thrill of its coin-operated inspiration. There are more accomplished Wii U launch titles than this, but for sheer entertainment value, this is a tough one to beat.



CRASH! BOOM! BANG! RIOTOUS ENTERTAINMENT

Below: To give the Quest mode some added replay incentive after your first playthrough, each level has a score, time and casualty challenge. There are also 62 villagers to find and collect, including the Creepy Guy, Morris Dancer and Druid.





Above: Having a large group of villagers isn't always an advantage, as you become a slower target. To counteract this, you can recruit special villagers like the Strongman, Pitcher and Sprinter.



WHEN IN DOUBT, JUST GO WITH THE THROW

When Vikings Attack!

When it comes to popular enemy archetypes, it's fair to say that Vikings rank considerably lower than aliens, Nazis and zombies. But in those few instances where a game has been built around horned helmets rather than plasma pistols, swastikas or rotting flesh, we've seen everything from the cartoonish *The Lost Vikings* to the considerably more graphic *Rune* and *Viking: Battle for Asgard*. In comparison, *When Vikings Attack!* rests firmly on the softer side of the slaughter spectrum, as although you'll see a lot of pillaging, the 'other' Viking staple is noticeably absent.

This is a family-friendly affair, as by setting the game in an idyllically colourful interpretation of Seventies England and tasking the player with fighting off a horde of cute Norse warriors – principally by throwing everything that isn't nailed down – Clever Beans has tapped into a sense of slapstick humour that's reminiscent of *Raving Rabbids*. And yet in terms of the core gameplay, *When Vikings Attack!* is best described as an arena battler with a quirky set of rules.

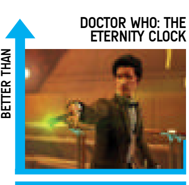


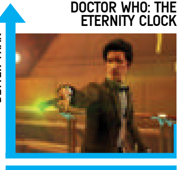
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Clever Beans
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

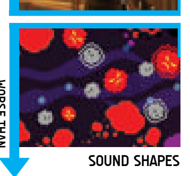
BETTER THAN

DOCTOR WHO: THE ETERNITY CLOCK





WORSE THAN



SOUND SHAPES

In Quest mode, you begin each level with a small group of villagers that can be guided with the analogue stick, and then, as you move between areas in classic beat-'em-up fashion, you thin out the Viking numbers by throwing barrels, cars and penguins while recruiting stray villagers to your cause. If the Vikings batter your whole team, you lose, so the trick is to intercept objects by dashing and lining up trick shots that ricochet into two groups simultaneously.

The 15 levels start out relatively simple, with standard Vikings that can be easily dispatched with a well-aimed hay bail or tractor, but as you progress through the museums, theme parks and zoos, the complexity increases with rebounding surfaces, missiles that convert Vikings to your side, and a limited number of bosses that include shield bearers and armoured warriors. The only thing that lets the game down is the somewhat repetitive combat and unimaginative level design, but while the single-player experience is an enjoyable, if short-lived, distraction, the Cross-Play multiplayer manages to elevate the game.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

DOUBLE VERSION: As a Cross-Play game, Vita and PS3 owners can compete against each other online. One purchase also grants you full access to *When Vikings Attack!* on both Sony machines.

We're definitely not talking *Bomberman* levels of competitive brilliance. Not by a long shot, but when four players are tossing all and sundry in the Last Man Standing, Vikings vs Vigilantes and Gold Rush game modes – which boil down to free-for-all, two-versus-two and a more inventive match type where you compete for medals by winning rounds under certain conditions respectively – the game taps into a similar style of tense multiplayer mayhem. *When Vikings Attack!* feels like one compelling mechanic that's had an entire game built around it, and although it's not the best Viking game ever made, we applauded Clever Beans for not making *When Zombies Attack!*.







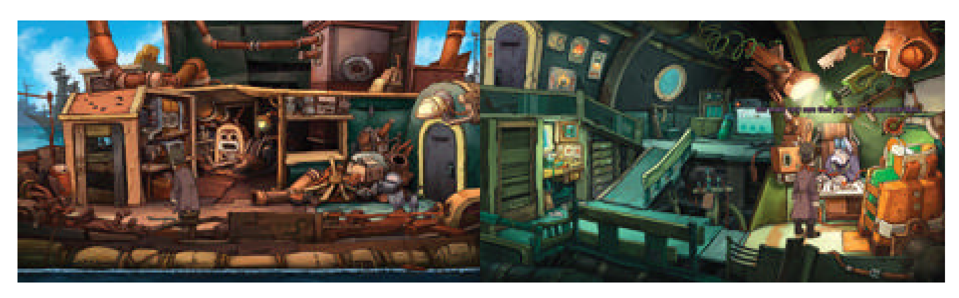
VERDICT 7/10

A VIKING GAME THAT WON'T PLUNDER YOUR WALLET

RUFUS RETURNS FOR ANOTHER ROUND OF DAEDALIC'S DEPONIA. NOW WITH ADDED CHAOS

Chaos On Deponia

Below: It's the beginning of some despicable acts of selfishness by Rufus. You almost don't want him to succeed in his mission, but he somehow blunders his way through to moderate success.



'*Monkey Island* was good, wasn't it?' We believe this to be the sentence that started the ball rolling to many an adventure game whose admirable, albeit lofty ambitions exceed those of the developer's talents. And without a Schafer, Gilbert and Grossman on board, we're left clicking through dialogue and inventory just to get to the next pretty bit of eye candy. Fortunately, *Chaos On Deponia* is better than that, even if Daedalic is clearly made up of big fans of LucasArts. The game features a Threepwood-inspired, feckless main character called Rufus on the trail of his robot girlfriend, 'Goal', who was kidnapped and accidentally dropped off on the junkyard planet Deponia. His mission is to save the planet and get the girl in the hapless manner that could only work in a comic science fiction world like this.

Rufus's main weapon is his inventory. It's lacking in the depth we'd like – no monkey wrenches or green spit to be found – but more than makes up for it in size. Depending on how tenacious you are, we suppose you could get through each chapter on trial and error alone, but given the size of Deponia, the larger areas and the scope of combining items with the environment, people and other items, it's infinitely more practical to use your noggin. Moreover, Daedalic seems to have scripted for almost every possible outcome, so if you do end up scratching your head and methodically running through your inventory to try each item in turn, at least something interesting will happen, even if it is only a snippet of new dialogue.

As far as art and animation is concerned, *Chaos On Deponia* is up there with the best of adventure games. It's beautifully coloured, each new scene being accompanied by a sharp intake of breath, and Rufus is an amusing character to watch, whether he's trying to activate a Rube Goldberg machine by pressing bellows with his right foot while tied to some rockets, or blithely sucking a lollipop, having given up the best chance of saving his robot girlfriend's mind for the sake of a free suckable sweetie.

Story and script are rarely so important in most games as they are to the adventure genre, and despite the very deliberate nods to the LucasArts classic, *Chaos On Deponia* has a character all of its own. Most of all, Rufus, the personality you'll be spending most of your time with and who seems annoyingly like Guybrush Threepwood at the start of the game, starts to develop into someone different. He's pretty guileless and ineffectual, but Threepwood had his heart in the right place, whereas Rufus is far more selfish and carefree – much to our amusement.

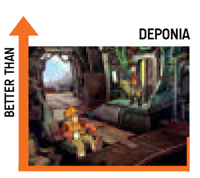
You can't help but make these LucasArts comparisons, and sometimes it's unfortunate that a developer chooses to ape this simple formula to what has proven to be an inimitable game, but if there was a competition for an original modern-day *Monkey Island*, *Chaos On Deponia* would be in the running.

DETAILS

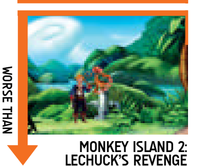
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Daedalic Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC:
ONLINE REVIEWED: Windows XP, 2.5GHz CPU, 2GB RAM DirectX 9 GPU with 512MB VRAM

BETTER THAN

DEPONIA



WORSE THAN



MONKEY ISLAND 2: LECHUCK'S REVENGE

FINGERPRINT

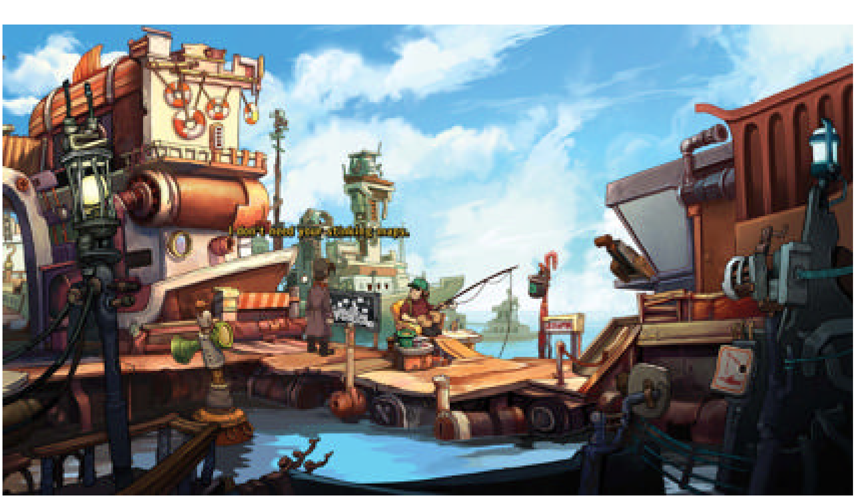
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DESPOTIC DEPONIA: The pirate steampunk town is a beautifully drawn and pleasantly different place to visit, while Rufus is a refreshingly shallow and self-centred character to play.



VERDICT 7/10

DEPONIA DEFINITELY DELIGHTS

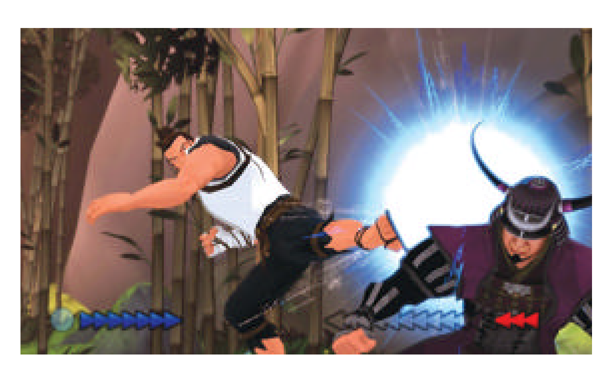


Above: Modern accessibility rears its head occasionally in *Chaos On Deponia*: the easy-access mouse wheel inventory aside, a mini-map allows Rufus to jump straight to any area he's already visited.



KARATAKIN' THE MICK. SORRY

Karateka



Above: The art style is really quite pleasant. It gives the game some character, even when the rest of the experience is entirely dull. Just one more example of why the quality on show in *Karateka* is a wasted effort.

Take a closer look at the original Apple II version of *Karateka* and you'll spot an uncanny resemblance to *Infinity Blade*, except with a greater focus on platforming and not nearly as many microtransactions. The modern reboot shares even more similarities, and for that reason alone there's probably cause to raise a curious eyebrow in *Karateka*'s direction.

The problem is that while *Infinity Blade* is constantly offering feedback to its players, showering them with rewards or hidden extras, *Karateka* fails to provide any of this. For a game that relies so heavily on replayability, this is *Karateka*'s biggest letdown. Ultimately, you're doing little more than pushing forward, defeating an encounter and repeating until you reach the end, which will take you little more than half an hour to manage anyway.

The idea here is that you'll try to better yourself, to aim for a greater score or, more importantly, finish the game with the first of three characters. The objective is simple: battle your way through a series of one-on-one martial arts fights until you reach the final boss and rescue poor Mariko from captivity. Initially you'll begin as True Love, nominative determinism personified and the weakest of the three playable characters. Get defeated and the honourable Monk will take his place, his extended health bar increasing your odds of survival. Lastly there's the Brute, whose heavy hands deal extra damage and recharging health bar means it's practically impossible to fail while in control of this big guy.

But where *Infinity Blade*'s constant rewards play into the multiple generations you'll play as, *Karateka*'s new characters act as little more than extra lives. The goal here, then, is to challenge yourself to make it to the end as Mariko's True Love. The problem is the game itself, which isn't nearly entertaining enough to warrant the multiple playthroughs that it hopes for. Combat is a repetitive chain of block, counter and block again, while additionally keeping an eye out for certain patterns to block in time with the attacks. Unfortunately, there's no rhyme or reason to the blocking system, and in most cases repeatedly bashing B will be enough to see you through a fight, the desire to improve alongside the increasing challenge fading with your willingness to reach the end.

In many ways, the potential for *Karateka* is already here. With a revamped combat system – preferably with subtle intricacies to your abilities and a worthy challenge – and improved replayability, it could have been a great side-scroller. As it stands, however, it is sadly little more than a 3D re-creation of a retro name that everyone has long since forgotten.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, PC, PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: D3Publisher
DEVELOPER: Liquid Entertainment
PRICE: 800 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: WAY OF THE SAMURAI 4



WORSE THAN: BIONIC COMMANDO REARMED

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HIDDEN DRAGON: A game like *Karateka* really benefits from hidden depth. Knowing when and how to use abilities would have increased the challenge and added some much-needed nuance to the game.



VERDICT 5/10

NO ONE CARES AND NO ONE WILL PLAY

Below: Very little timing is needed to block an opponent's attacks, while your own are a melee of X and Y button presses until the enemy regains their balance. It's a missed opportunity, since at times it feels like *Karateka* could be a brilliant martial arts game.





WHY I ...

The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

MURRAY ANDREWS,
CLIMAX STUDIOS

I was trying to think of some really obscure text-based adventure from the Eighties, or a low-fi indie game that only me and three other people have played in an effort to look cool and score extra geek points. Unfortunately, I'm not cool and I've probably got enough geek points to last a lifetime. Plus I just kept coming back to one title: The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time.

If I really need to explain why Ocarina Of Time *is my all-time favourite game then you're obviously reading the wrong magazine, and should maybe put* **games™** *down immediately and go in search of* Gardener's Monthly *or some other equally enthralling publication. I mean, it's* Ocarina Of Time. *You know, Link… in 3D… riding a horse… across a massive open field in Hyrule, with the wind in his hair and the sweet sounds of Koji Kondo's music serenading him on his way. Pure joy!*

Oh, and it had a gold cartridge. Did you hear me? A gold cartridge! What's not to like?



"If I really need to explain why Ocarina Of Time is my all-time favourite game then you're obviously reading the wrong magazine"

MURRAY ANDREWS, CLIMAX STUDIOS

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RETRO

>.'AN EXPERIMENTER CREATED A BIZARRE MACHINE…'

NO.130 DECEMBER 2012

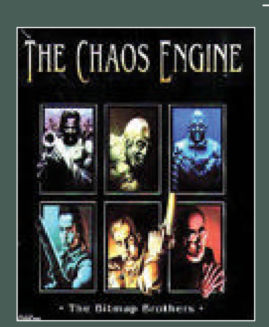
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BEHIND THE SCENES

THE CHAOS ENGINE

It combined Gauntlet, puzzles and blasting to bring disorder to four virtual worlds. games™ talks to Mike Montgomery, co-founder of The Bitmap Brothers, about the legend of The Chaos Engine



Released: 1993
Format: Amiga, Acorn, Atari ST, DOS, Mega Drive, SNES, CD32
Publisher: Spectrum Holobyte
Developer: The Bitmap Brothers

KEY STAFF:
Mike Montgomery
MD and additional code
Simon Knight, Eric Matthews
Design
Stephen Cargill
Code
Dan Malone
Art
Richard Joseph
Music and SFX





FOR A MAN who spawned a gaming legacy and headed up a unique, talented and creative group of people, Mike Montgomery has a surprisingly rusty memory. After founding The Bitmap Brothers with Eric Matthews and Steve Kelly, making their gaming debut with *Xenon* in 1988, the studio's managing director oversaw 13 published games, from *Gods* to *Magic Pockets* to *Z*.

Yet when asked about *The Chaos Engine*, a run-and-gun actioner about six mercenaries on a mission to destroy a peace-threatening machine, Montgomery becomes both candid and exasperated. "You're asking like… you're going back like 20-odd years ago," he says of a game that became one of the developer's most-loved titles.

And yet, just as a great game never dies, so Montgomery's recollection soon picks up speed, as his mind clears the chaos of all of those events that have happened since the game made its debut in 1993 and allows him to piece together the memories of one of the best games to grace any platform.

"The idea for the game came from a novel called *The Difference Engine*," he says, of a book by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, released in 1990. The novel imagined that English mathematician, philosopher, inventor and engineer Charles Babbage had succeeded in perfecting his Analytical Engine, bringing in the computer age a century ahead of its time when the Industrial Revolution was in full flow. "One of the guys at work was reading it and he started to work on the design of the game," Montgomery continues. "I can't for the life of me remember his name, but he didn't complete the design and he did a very good job of it."

There was enough for the company to get started, and *The Chaos Engine* took inspiration from this alternative take on history. Setting itself in a steampunk Victorian-era England, the game revolved around a time traveller becoming stranded in the late 1800s and introducing technology ahead of its time, causing untold rewriting of history in the process and much ensuing chaos.

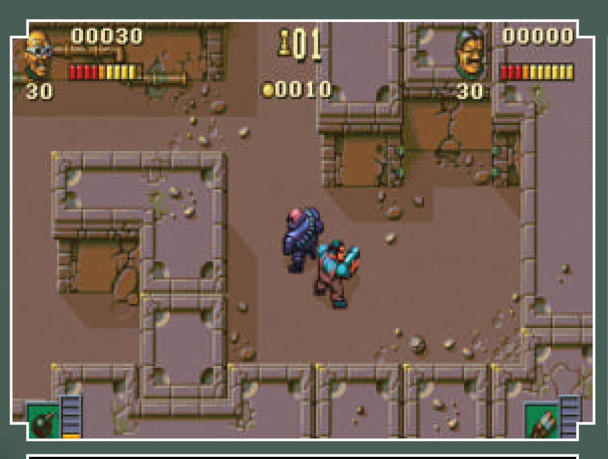
"Dan Malone started work on the graphics and he created the whole steampunk theme," Montgomery explains. "I would say that he actually invented that kind of style, and it looked so good that we started to really work on the actual development. That is where it all came together really, with the story and graphics gelling in a steampunk style."

The game was first developed for the Amiga. The basics, having been laid down from the start, were built upon by the team. Simon Knight took over the design for the game, and Stephen Cargill was tasked with programming it, assisted by Montgomery, who produced additional code – "I was involved with a little bit of the design and programming," he says.

WE PUT OUR HEART AND SOUL IN AND IT CAME OUT JUST BRILLIANTLY

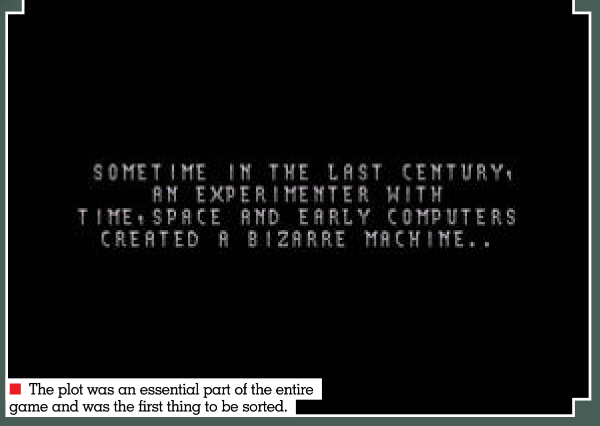
Malone continued with the design, and the music and sound effects were worked on by Richard Joseph. It was a very small team, working from The Bitmap Brothers' office in Wapping.

"THE GAME WAS very much a team thing," says Montgomery. "We all wanted the same thing: a top-down, run-and-gun-style game that had puzzle elements as well. We were very much into some puzzle elements at that time. I don't know if that was a trend within gaming back then – I don't remember – but it was something that we wanted to do. We had done continued>





There were four different worlds within the game. The later ones were accessed via a password.



The plot was an essential part of the entire game and was the first thing to be sorted.











Players could choose two of the six characters to play, with one of them becoming their gun buddy.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:
SLEEPERY JEEM
"I do remember loving the steampunk art but can't remember beating it, sadly. I gave this to my brother for Christmas years ago. Little smeg sold it as well. Was just a *Commando* clone but was well presented."

Posted by:
RYAN WHITELAW
"Oh my god, one of my favourites ever! Give me a moment (aka let me finish my wine) before I give you a 2,000-word journalistic spiel into why I love it!"

Posted by:
BILGE RAT
"It was a bit hard for me at the time, I think. I tried playing it properly but I was probably too young to make much sense of it. I eventually found cheats that allowed me to get through and finish the game. I don't remember especially enjoying the experience. Any of the subtle themes or art elements were pretty much lost on me, so it was mostly just repetitive blasting."

Posted by:
SNAGGLETOOTH
"Played this game to death on my A600 way back. Totally addictive and hard as nails at times. Even provided a few good laughs in later years on beer-fuelled gaming evenings. Think it's one of the few games from back then that stood up better on the Amiga than it did on consoles, and then there was the CD32 version with that flashy intro."




As well as shooting, there was an emphasis on puzzles such as collecting keys and opening new areas.

AS SEEN ON TV

AN EARLY version of *The Chaos Engine* was previewed on Channel 4's *GamesMaster*. It came as no surprise that the show was interested, as The Bitmap Brothers had a solid relationship with the producers and staff.

"We did a lot of work with *GamesMaster* over the years," Montgomery recalls. "There was a sort of a change in direction for the industry really with *GamesMaster*, because all of a sudden it started to become mainstream. It's like before it was just printed magazines, and then there was videogames on television, becoming more mass market. And, yes, *The Chaos Engine* was on *GamesMaster*, which was a great achievement really especially, I think, because we did it quite early on in the *GamesMaster* era. The recording studio was far away from our office, which is another story. Isle of Dogs, I think, if I remember right. It used to be a bugger to get to but well worth it."

it with quite a few of our games anyway. The puzzle element was important to us."

Knight came up with most of the puzzles, although the others chipped in with ideas of their own. Asked for his favourite, Montgomery couldn't recall, but he remembers that, despite being nailed early on, some of the design work was organic. "We didn't design each level from the very beginning," he says. "We designed the levels as we went along and we brought in the puzzles as we went along. That's the organic part of it. But underlining this was the actual vision for the game, which stayed true throughout the development."

As such, the steampunk style was something that was fixed. "We had this shooter with puzzles with a really good, strong, steampunk style, and that was deliberate," he continues. "We were doing something in a style that actually suited the game."

Montgomery had put together a skilled crew, and they were happy working together in an environment that emphasised the creative process above all else. "We really enjoyed working as a team," he recalls. "We always felt that the most important thing about a game was not just the program but the music, the sound effects and all of those other elements, and so everyone who worked on one of our games was valued. It's the whole team that actually makes something that comes together that's brilliant. Teams were becoming important. There were very few people at the time that could produce games as a one-man ban and certainly not to that extent."

The team wanted the plot to integral to the game, ensuring there was a very real reason for defeating the mad Baron Fortesque and the Chaos En itself. "I think you always have to have some sort of plot in any game really," says Montgomery. "I suppose in those days there were always big bosses at the end of levels and stuff like that so, obviously, that was partly to do with it. We wanted a big boss at the end. It was the trend."

And yet the team wasn't afraid to depart from the norm. Where many games would try to shoehorn a plot into a game at the end, with many stories written at the end of development, *The Chaos Engine* was a political game that brought in the idea of a Royal Family and British Empire left in tatters and the world being in economic and political chaos.

"It's only after the game had been released did I actually realise that," confesses Montgomery. "Actually, now thinking about it, the guy that did the initial design, the one who brought that story to the table, was a bit like that. I don't know what the word would be to describe him…" Politically motivated, we offer? "Yes, he was sort of like that. I wouldn't call him weird, but he was a bit weird too," he laughs. "In a nice way. A nice man."

A DECISION WAS made early on to allow players to assume the role of two of the six mercenaries. Each had their own personality, from a brainless bully to a fragile thinker. "It needed that," asserts Montgomery. "I think if you didn't put a personality on each one it would be quite boring. What's the point of actually choosing two things if they are all the same? You might as well just choose any two. It's like modern-day RPGs. By giving each one a different personality, it not only altered who you were playing with but what they actually did. It gave a combination of ways of actually playing the game as well, because you could pick two now but then come back, play it again and pick another two or drop one and change one. So it really lent to the whole story, didn't it? We just thought, 'Why bother having six characters if they didn't have individual personalities?'"

As well as different characters, the game was split into four distinct worlds: the forest, workshops, Fortesque mansion and the cellars. Gold keys would open secret rooms, nodes would reveal silver keys, bridges would appear, dynamite would destroy beetles, and lizardmen would have to be shot. First-aid kits or power-ups could be collected, steam jets would hinder you, and so it went on.

Each world had its own musical score, and Montgomery says it was important to have these four separate styles within the game. "It gave the game progression," he offers, "and you wanted the progression in there so that people could actually think, 'Yes, there's a reason for carrying on to the end of the game.' If it was all the same, people – not all, but some – would just get bored. *The Chaos Engine* added something new all the time."

THE MUSIC DIDN'T just change for each of the four worlds. As players

WHAT THEY SAID…

"There's no doubt that it looks terrific. The 'steampunk' graphics are wonderfully imaginative and that frenetic rate that everything shifts at is certainly adrenaline-pumping. Aurally it's even better – I'd even go as far to say that the game has the best music and sound effects I've yet heard in an Amiga game"

The One Amiga, Issue 53, February 1993



Creepy *Addams Family*-style disembodied hands were among the enemies out to get you.

explored different areas of the game, the music would alter. It set the tone for what was to come and gave the game a cinematic feeling of sorts. "We spent a lot of time matching the music to different moods," Montgomery says. "I suppose *The Chaos Engine* was the start of that. Having music that actually changed made such a difference, and it enhanced the gameplay massively."

And it was certainly important to keep people moving on. The game was rather tough at times, so there needed to be progression. "I wouldn't say that was deliberate," says Montgomery of the difficulty. "Most of our games were a little bit too hard for people, but I don't believe it was deliberate. I think it was more of a case of that's what we did, and you have to remember that this wasn't a game where you have to think a lot. It was action, just pushing into action constantly, giving panic modes almost."

The team worked on the game for nine months, and much care and attention was paid to the details. At the end of each world there was a password, which ensured that players would not have to keep replaying the same level and could feel a sense of progress. "I think that was something to do with the culture at the time in that you couldn't actually save games," he says. "There was a lot of work in those passwords. God, this is going back a bit now. We encrypted some of the variables into a password. It actually had various bits of information so that players could pick up where they left off."

"*Speedball 2* was multiplayer, wasn't it?" Montgomery says of The Bitmap Brothers' first forays into competitive play. "It wasn't so much a bold move but something we were actually quite keen to do on all our games, you know, having this two-player element. It also helped us to write the game because we could actually write it in two-player first and then put the AI in afterwards, based on how you would play it."

THIS CAME TOGETHER WITH GOOD GRAPHICS, GOOD PROGRAMMING, GOOD STYLE, THE LOT

The game took nine months to make and was highly rated. *Amiga Power* loved it so much that the magazine eventually named it the eleventh best game of all time. "I would have put it first," laughs Montgomery. Why, we ask? "Because we wrote it," he answers simply. "Look, it wasn't about the graphics, the gameplay, the programming, or the sound effects and music – it was all of it. And that's what *The Chaos Engine* had: it had everything in it. It had brilliant music and each man had his own, distinctive industrial-type music. And really, this whole lot had just come together with the sensation, if you like, of the good graphics, the good programming, the good style line, the whole lot."

He loved it so much that he remembers how the game was constantly being played for pleasure by the team as the development reached an advanced stage. "The policy of The Bitmap Brothers was to develop games that we wanted to play," he adds. "And that was one that we just adored. It was a game that we put our heart and soul into and it came out just brilliantly."

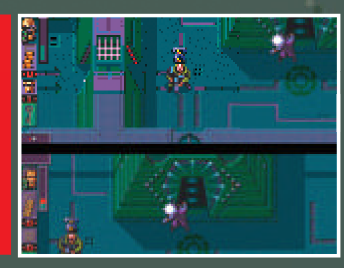
>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Gauntlet > The Chaos Engine > The Chaos Engine 2



With a top-down view, mass killing and intriguing characters, *Gauntlet* was an inspiring game to many, including The Bitmap Brothers.





Three years later, The Bitmap Brothers revisited its game for *The Chaos Engine 2*, producing a second well-received Amiga shooter classic.

BEST BOSS

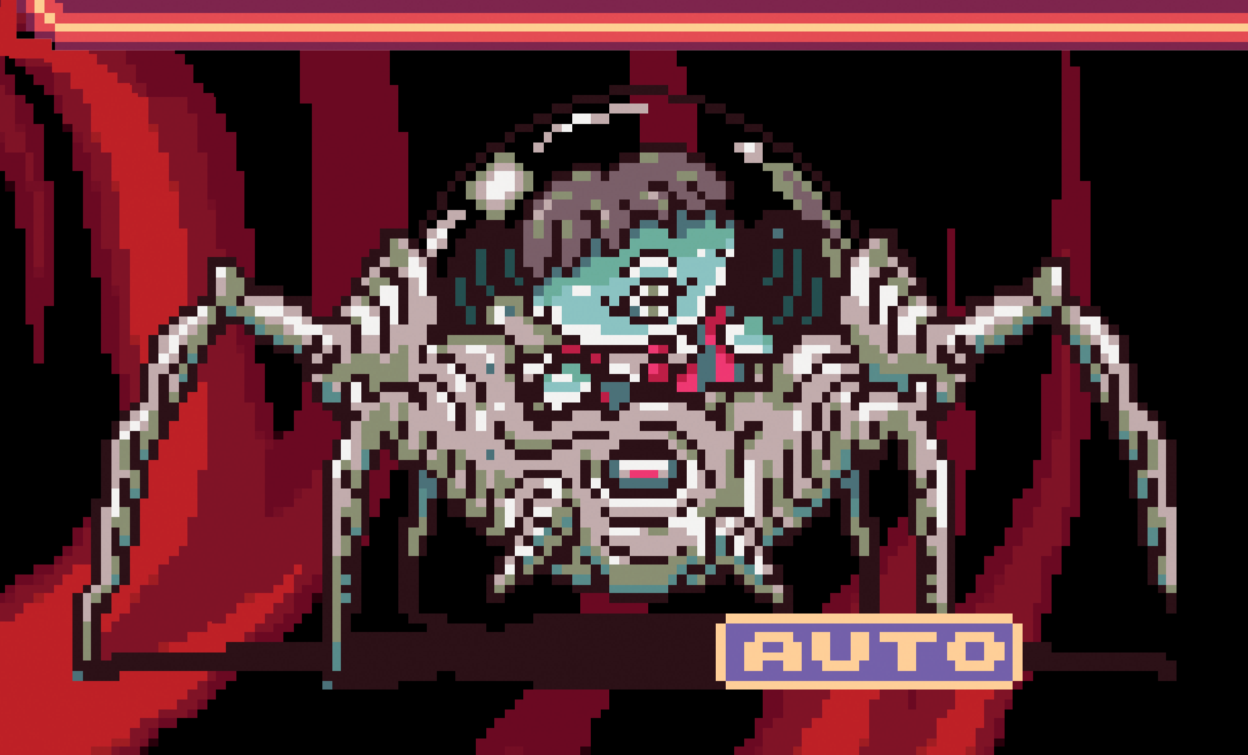
EARTHBOUND SNES [Nintendo] **1994**

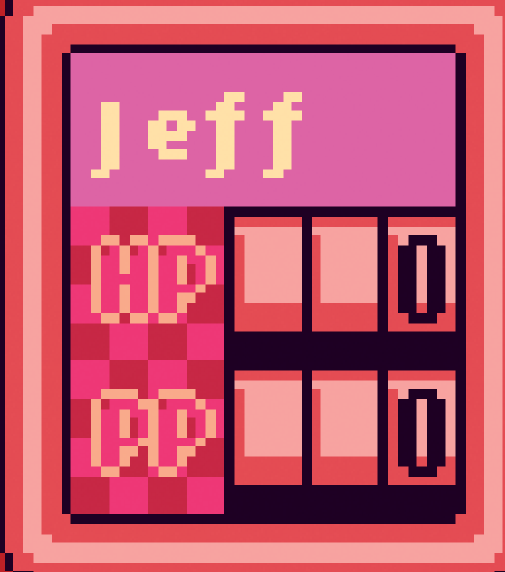
■ Sprouting out from within some kind of otherworldly space anus like an apocalyptic case of piles, Giygas' form has evolved beyond recognition since his *Mother* appearance. His tremendous cosmic power isn't truly demonstrated until Ness' neighbour and Giygas' right-hand man, Porky, unleashes his form from the Devil's Machine, which transforms the battleground into a red mist inhabited by nightmarish faces. Traditional attacks don't make a dent, and when all hope is lost for the four children it's the desperate prayers of Paula that destroy this hideous manifestation. Illustrated through kaleidoscopic illusions, a disquieting soundtrack and nonsensical dialogue, there's never been a more terrifying and bleak antagonist in gaming's rich history.



• Do you want to scream for help here in the dark?!

• Ha ha ha ha ha!







CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Commodore 16
Year: 1986
Publisher: Elite
Developer: Japan Capsule Computers UK Ltd

GHOSTS'N GOBLINS

ORIGINAL RELEASE Board: Unique Capcom hardware **Year:** 1985 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house

GHOSTS'N GOBLINS IS legendary for two things: where to place that bloody apostrophe in its title and its masochistic challenge.

Its story told the tale of a brave knight called Arthur, who leaps to the rescue of a blue-haired princess named Prin Prin – said to take her name from a Japanese onomatopoeia for something that bounces and jiggles like a pair of buttocks – after she gets kidnapped by Satan following a nice romantic picnic with the knight in a graveyard.

The rescue mission that ws is notorious for being of the most challenging in gaming. Separating the men from the platforming gods, *Ghosts'N Goblins* has one of the most gruelling opening stages of any videogame, with enemies relentless in their attacks, spawning from all angles, and Arthur moving with all the agility of a man wearing… well, a suit of armour.

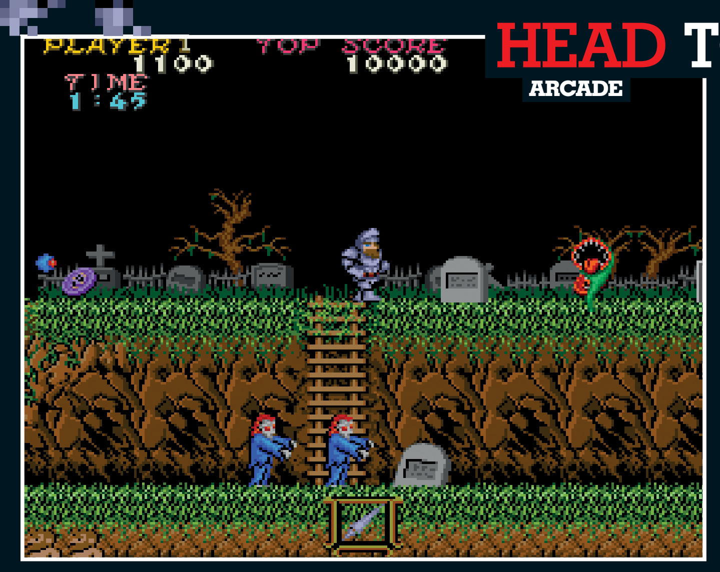
It seems that Capcom was aiming for uniform realism back in 1985, and this would be fine if its knight wasn't starring in a tricky platformer packed with unyielding ghosts, zombies and demons, many with erratic attack patterns. But if that wasn't challenging enough, Capcom also forced players to complete the game twice, and on the second run through they had to beat the final boss using the weakest weapon in the game.

Despite all the paid torture it served up, though, *Ghost'N Goblins* still became one of Capcom's most popular coin-ops of the Eighties, and it appeared on a slew of home formats that included everything from the ZX Spectrum to the NES. Brit software house Elite Systems was responsible for the majority of home computer ports, and of the versions it published the Commodore 16 edition is the most calamitous.

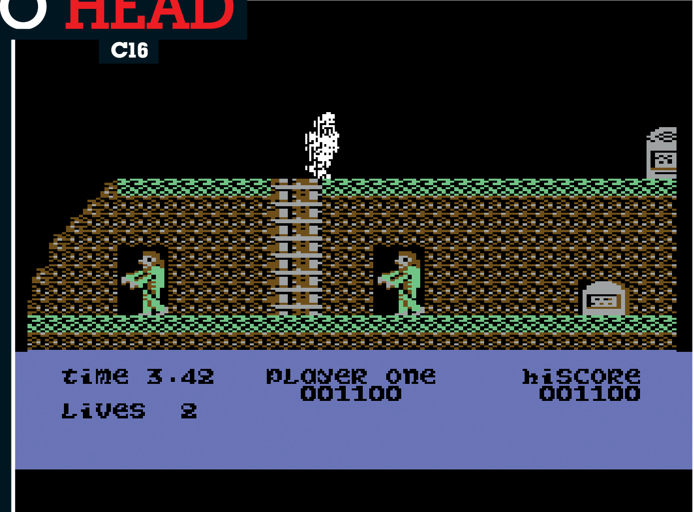
While the C64 version features just four of the coin-op's six stages, the C16 only manages two. Moreover, it also has no music, none of the extra bonuses or weapons over the throwable lances that Arthur starts the game with, and it's missing many of the enemies too. The graphics and animation are the scariest things, though, to the extent that the game looks like a bad stop-motion horror movie. Overall, it feels more like a magazine demo than a full game, which is probably why many C16 fans consider it to be the worst arcade port to grace their machine.

Unlike the princess, this is beyond rescue and should left to perish in conversion hell.

HEAD TO HEAD



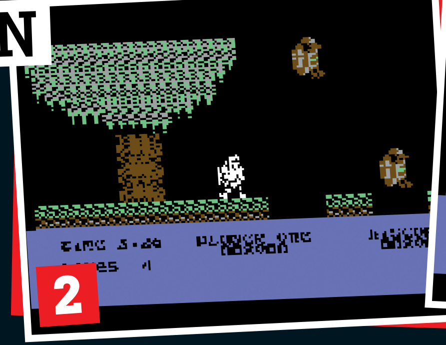
ARCADE

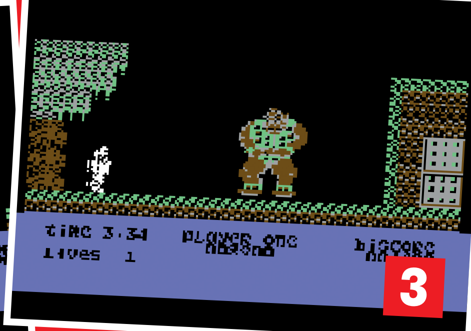


C16



THE BREAKDOWN





1 The animation and collision detection are pretty bad. Arthur doesn't really walk; he just shuffles forward as if in a sped-up Benny Hill chase. And when he climbs ladders he just levitates up them like he's caught in a spaceship's tractor beam. The sprites have ugly black borders too.

2 The C16 was basically an affordable entry-level Commodore computer, and so *Ghosts'N Goblins* was probably beyond its limitations to be fair. With just 16K to play with, this conversion is missing many of the enemies, the catchy music, the weapons and even four whole stages.

3 Arthur looks like he's encased in carbonite. Also, he can only sustain a single hit and so doesn't lose his suit of armour and get forced to play the hero in his boxer shorts. The underwear is obviously a minor thing, but nevertheless an iconic moment in the coin-op that's not in this port.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **NES** Year: **1986** Publisher: **Capcom** Developer: **Micronics**

■ Considering that the console was a popular stomping ground for taxing platformers, it's no surprise that the NES boasted a solid *Ghosts'N Goblins* conversion. It looks and plays close to the original, the level arrangements are faithful, and the difficulty is softened somewhat through having unlimited continues.

THE COMPLETE HI

YEAR IN 19

1999 MARKED the end of a millennium, and in many ways it also marked the end of traditional videogames. As technology was getting more and more advanced, the cost of creating games was increasing, often to match the size of the teams making them. Games being developed by a single developer were becoming the exception, rather than the norm, while the huge success of Sony's PlayStation was attracting the attention of behemoths like Microsoft, which would unleash its own console just two years later.

There was definitely a distinct sense of change in the air, mainly heralded by Sega's Dreamcast, which was beginning to take centre stage – if only for a short time – while Sony and Nintendo were hastily preparing their next home consoles. The Dreamcast's biggest strength was that it offered truly stunning arcade conversions, which often surpassed the originals. Sega's problem, however, was that it was failing to acquire meatier games that matched the epics found on the PlayStation and N64. Games like *Shenmue* certainly went some way towards addressing that, but they were in the minority. Sega was also struggling to meet the ambitious online promises it was making, while the focus on numerous fun but expensive peripherals further added to its woes. And then Sony announced the PlayStation 2…

With Sony's boast of state-of-the-art graphics and the nonsensical-sounding Emotion Engine, gamers began to shy away from Sega's machine, seemingly content to wait for the PS2, which would arrive a year later. It became too much for Sega, and in 2001 it announced the end of its Dreamcast and revealed its intention to release future games on rival platforms. The Dreamcast ended up selling 10 million units, a fraction of the 154 million sales the PS2 would eventually amass.

If Sega had struggled with its console battles in 1999, Nintendo was confidently holding its own in the handheld market. After its expensive premium home console had failed to make the desired impact, SNK had entered the handheld market with the short-lived Neo Geo Pocket. SNK's machine immediately looked out of date compared to the Game Boy Color, which had also launched in 1998, so SNK quickly unleashed a coloured update that made its debut a few short months later in March 1999.

The Pocket's strengths were excellent build quality and a fantastic joystick – still the



■ Although *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike* received all the accolades, SNK's *Mark Of The Wolves* was just as worthy of your time.

■ Square followed up *Final Fantasy VII* with the equally impressive *FFVIII*, which introduced the morose Squall Leonhart and an awesome new Limit Break system.

■ *Ape Escape* was a novel offering from SCE Japan Studio, which had you capturing apes with the PlayStation's DualShock controller.

■ The Neo Geo Pocket was SNK's answer to Nintendo's Game Boy range. Despite some great titles, it soon fell by the wayside.

■ Black Isle Studios' *Planescape: Torment* was based on a new *Dungeons & Dragons* universe. It also happens to be one of the greatest RPGs of all time

STORY OF GAMES

best we've ever seen on a handheld – backed up by a selection of genuinely great games based on arcade classics like *Metal Slug*, *Samurai Shodown* and *The King Of Fighters*. Unfortunately, developers didn't flock to the machine in the same way as Nintendo's more established handheld, and while companies like Capcom delivered some fantastic titles, SNK was left relying on its own small catalogue of gems. Like the Dreamcast, it was discontinued in 2001, but there was a sadder ending for SNK, as the company itself folded in October of that year.

It may have been bad news for Sega and SNK, but Nintendo and Sony's consoles continued to shine, delivering a range of mature titles that kept them firmly ahead in the console war that Sega would eventually lose. Several notable franchises launched in 1999 on the PlayStation, including the barmy *Ape Escape*, *Syphon Filter*, the Spielberg-produced *Medal Of Honor*, Konami's creepy *Silent Hill* and Activision's excellent *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. Nintendo was also hitting its stride, and while games weren't as plentiful as on Sony's console, there were still plenty of gems, including board game spin-off *Mario Party*, *Super Smash Bros*, and great Rare efforts like *Donkey Kong 64* and *Jet Force Gemini*.

REVIEW 99

And yet, while all the focus was firmly on the console market, it was the PC that was turning out to be one of the most diverse gaming platforms of 1999. Graphics cards continued to grow in power, allowing for all manner of exciting new games. *Outcast* was a flawed gem that looked incredible thanks to its use of ray casting, while the epic multiplayer battles of *X-Wing Alliance* bought George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe to life like never before. The multiplayer shenanigans continued with *Counter-Strike*, which had spawned from a modification of Valve's *Half-Life*, while *System Shock 2* was an ambitious FPS that blurred the lines between the popular genre and the RPG world and would eventually act as the spiritual predecessor to the brilliant *BioShock*. And then, of course, there was the mighty *Planescape: Torment*, quite possibly one of the finest RPGs of all time, with a stunning story and immense character development, which would help shape future games like *Mass Effect*, *Alpha Protocol* and the *Dragon Age* series.

As 1999 drew to a close, it finished a chapter in gaming that had spawned six generations of consoles and computers, entertaining gamers for over two decades. And that's a pretty good way to end the millennium.



■ Amazingly, Valve's *Team Fortress 2* was first announced in 1999. It wouldn't receive an actual release until 2007.

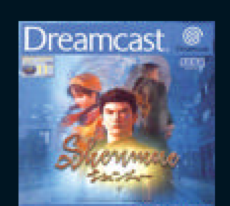
■ Irrational Games' *System Shock 2* was a superb hybrid that would blend RPGs and first-person shooters.

■ *SoulCalibur* had an amazing Dreamcast port, easily eclipsing the original arcade game. What a pity, then, that Namco released so few games on Sega's system.

■ Sega's machine really came into its own in 1999, with a selection of fantastic games like *Shenmue*. It wouldn't be enough, though, and it was discontinued two years later.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR: Chris Avellone

■ Chris Avellone's videogame career began in 1995 when he joined Interplay. Within four short years he had worked on licences linked to *Star Trek*, *Fallout* and *Dungeons & Dragons* and became lead designer on what many still consider to be the best Western RPG of all time: *Planescape: Torment*. Avellone's love affair with the *D&D* universe continued thanks to releases like the *Icewind Dale* series and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*. He then moved to Obsidian Entertainment, where he has been involved in everything from *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* to *Fallout: New Vegas* and the massively underrated *Alpha Protocol*. He's currently hard at work on the Kickstarted projects *Wasteland 2* and *Project Eternity*.



EXTENDED PLAY: **1999**

SHENMUE

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we reveal how Yu Suzuki's massively ambitious game changed 3D worlds forever

IT'S TELLING that, despite the fact that Sega appears to have no desire to develop it, *Shenmue III* remains one of gaming's most requested releases. When Yu Suzuki's *Shenmue* arrived on the Dreamcast three days short of the new millennium, it hinted at a rich game world that today's consoles and PCs are only just beginning to emulate.

Shenmue was massively hyped in its early months and was originally planned for Sega's Saturn. Known as *Project Berkley*, it was to be a conventional RPG based on the storyline of *Virtua Fighter*, with Akira as the main character. As the months progressed, Suzuki decided to move his ambitious project to the Dreamcast.

It was a wise decision, as even that technology struggled to maintain the rich world. At the time, stepping into *Shenmue* felt like stepping into a living world. Character models were frightfully realistic, protagonist Ryo could interact with all manner of objects, and the virtual representation of Yokosuka felt amazingly authentic. It would all be eclipsed with the arrival of *Grand Theft Auto III* and *Shenmue*'s sequel in two short years, but at the time it felt like a revelation. A revelation that cost Sega a reported $70 million, but a revelation all the same.

FEW GAMES HAVE COME CLOSE TO ITS SCOPE, AMBITION AND CREATIVITY

You could interact with any citizen you fancied, do jobs to earn money, take part in bar fights and even visit an arcade to play classic Suzuki arcade games like *Space Harrier* and *Hang-On*. There was dynamic weather, the characters of the game world kept to their own schedules, and everything was voice-acted. There was a realness to *Shenmue* that no other game of the time offered, and while some complained that it was nowhere near as interactive as first promised – Suzuki grandly called its genre FREE (Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment) during development – many more fell in love with its giddy ambition.

This, in part, is due to *Shenmue*'s strong plot, which sees Ryo hunting down the mysterious antagonist Lan Di, who kills Ryo's father in the dramatic opening. Clues are picked up through interacting with Yokosuka's residents, and while the story is one that's been told many times before, it's brought to life by its vibrant and varied characters.

Suzuki's impressive vision was rounded off by robust fighting mechanics and the addition of Quick Time Effects, or QTEs. While context-sensitive gameplay mechanics had been used in previous games like *Dragon's Lair* and many other LaserDisc games, they were rarely as well integrated into cut-scenes and gameplay as they were in *Shenmue*.

Even if the *Shenmue* saga failed to live up to Sega's original hype, few other games have come close to capturing its sheer scope, ambition and creativity.



There was a magic to the world of *Shenmue*. Even something as mundane as buying an item from a vending machine felt special.

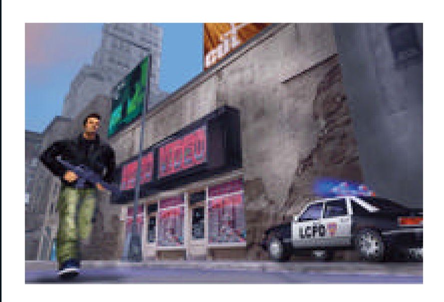


Shenmue was notable for having the player do jobs in order to raise money. You could always skive off for a quick race, though.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ What didn't happen next? Yu Suzuki's magnificent vision paved the way for all manner of impressive, immersive videogames. The most notable was *Grand Theft Auto III*, but *Shenmue*'s impressive open environments can be found in everything from *Deadly Premonition* to *Sleeping Dogs* and *Fallout 3*. Sega's very own *Yakuza* series is a direct descendent of *Shenmue* in many ways, but it's different enough to stop Sega from simply making *Shenmue III* with Yakuza's engine, like many gamers have suggested. And then, of course, there is *Shenmue II*, the even bigger sequel that continued a story so epic that Sega has never found a way to successfully finish it – although Mega64 had a good go. And let's not forget *Shenmue*'s QTEs, a mechanic that has gone on to appear in games as varied as *Resident Evil 4*, *Uncharted*, *Tomb Raider: Legend* and the *God Of War* franchise.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

SYSTEM SHOCK 2



■ WITHOUT *SYSTEM Shock 2* there would be no *BioShock*. This innovative project from Irrational Games and Looking Glass Studios made a massive impact, building on *Half-Life* while delivering a helping of RPG elements, which would appear a year later in Warren Spector's *Deus Ex*.

VIB RIBBON



■ *VIB RIBBON* is one of the PSone's most experimental games. Designer Masaya Matsuura created a unique experience, as levels would be generated from any music CD you loaded into your PlayStation. With its distinctive look and endless replay opportunities, it's one of the machine's most imaginative rhythm-action games.

CRAZY TAXI



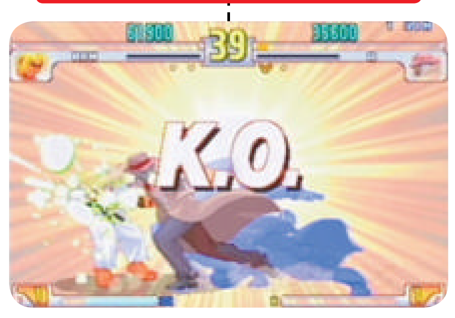
■ SEGA HAS always created superb arcade experiences, and *Crazy Taxi* endures as one of the best examples. Incredibly simple gameplay was married to a rich rock soundtrack and sublime controls, allowing you to zip around the huge city with ease. It went on to receive a superb Dreamcast port with a host of additional features.

SILENT HILL



■ KONAMI'S ENTRY into survival horror is one of its best. Protagonist Harry Mason is an everyday Joe who is underpowered and ill-equipped to handle *Silent Hill*'s many monstrosities, while the chilling soundtrack, unsettling visuals and rich story have lost none of their impact. It's clunky to play, but a masterful suspense builder.

STREET FIGHTER III: 3RD STRIKE



■ THE FINAL update of *Street Fighter III* is the best. While Ken was still predictably overpowered, the introduction of new characters like Remy, Twelve and Q added massively to the game. Even today it's still played in tournaments, while the 2004 EVO showdown between Justin and Daigo has become the stuff of videogame legends.



COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: NES
YEAR: 1985
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £1,000+



EXHIBIT A: *Gyromite* and *Stack-Up* both included small parts for use with ROB, so finding them complete and in good condition isn't easy.



EXHIBIT B: ROB was sold separately, but as solo units came with no games they sold poorly and are now very rare.



EXHIBIT C: Only two games were released for ROB. The big box versions are some of the rarest first-party games for the NES.

COMPLETE ROB COLLECTION

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

BEFORE NINTENDO became famous for videogames, it was a toy manufacturer, releasing everything from shooting galleries and board games to even its own version of Lego. ROB (Robotic Operating Buddy), a peripheral for the NES, can be seen as the company's transition product and demonstrates a Nintendo using its experience and knowledge of the toy trade to help its assault on the US videogame industry with the NES.

Though ROB failed to take off, many believe that he played an important role in helping the NES infiltrate US homes by manipulating a wary market, burned by the videogame crash of the Eighties, into seeing the NES as a toy and not a games console. ROB was released as part of the NES Deluxe Set, but was also sold separately, and only two games were released for the accessory: *Gyromite*, which was a pack-in with the Deluxe Set, and *Stack-Up*.

Our collector has a full ROB collection. This comprises a complete Deluxe Set, standalone boxed ROB unit, and big box versions of both *Gyromite* and *Stack-Up* – the former one of the rarest first-party games for the NES. What's even more remarkable is that all are the uncommon HOL code versions (Dutch releases). Our collector knows of no other set like his.

FACT!

ROB's commercial life may have been short, but he's made appearances in a number of Nintendo games, including *Star Fox* and *Mario Kart DS*.



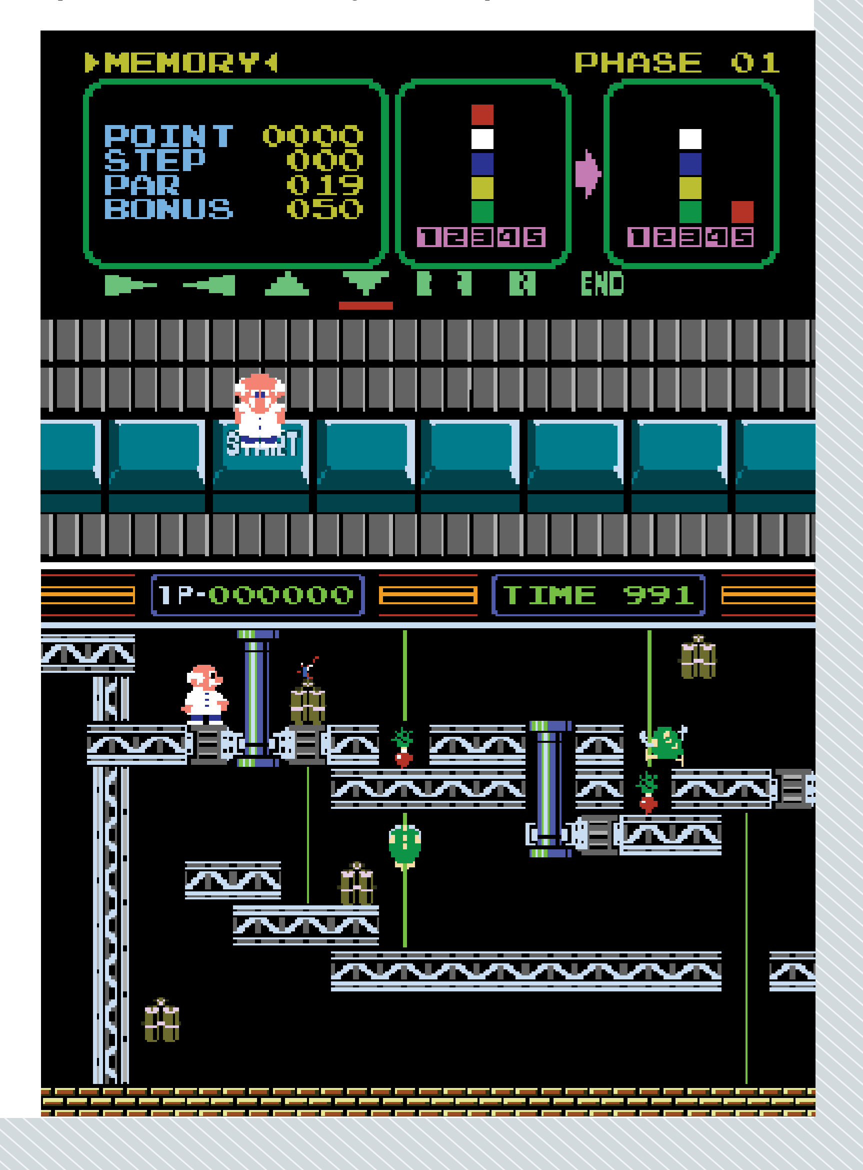
WORTH PLAYING?

IT'S A tough one as ROB is a bit of a one-off, which probably speaks volumes about how good a peripheral he is. Playing *Gyromite* or *Stack-Up* with him is certainly a unique experience, if not a particularly entertaining one.

It doesn't help that only two games were ever released for ROB and neither was anything to write home about. Also, when you dig a little deeper into what ROB actually does, you quickly realise he's just a glorified second controller and his functions are pretty limited. Despite what his commercials might have had you think, he wasn't something that kids could bust out to play *Super Mario Bros 3* with when they were grounded and forbidden having friends round.

The final issue, which is one that our collector points out, is that playing a game with ROB is a pretty tedious experience. The simplest of actions can take him several minutes to perform, so you'll probably die of boredom, hunger or tiredness before finishing a game.

Despite failing to set the world of peripherals alight, ROB isn't without his fans, and he is now seen as a desirable and lesser-known piece of Nintendo's past by many NES collectors.





I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Sjoerd Rutten / Dr Retro**
Occupation: **Medical student**

What is it about the NES, and ROB in particular, that is attractive to you?
The NES is the first console I played as a kid and I've spent countless hours trying to beat classics like *Super Mario Bros 3*, *Double Dragon II* and *Mega Man 2*. When I got into collecting about six years ago it was an easy choice to start with the NES games I played as a kid, but as usual with collectors, it doesn't stop, as in the end you want them all! I've always been fascinated by rarity and special editions. To see videos and pictures of the rare games I have in my collection, please check out the Dr Retro Facebook page at **www.facebook.com/drretromd**.

How and where did you find your ROB collection?
First I need to explain something about the regional releases on the NES. Every NES game has a standardised code being NES-XX-YYY, where XX determines the game and YYY determines the region. For instance, a game that was released for the Spanish market has ESP, the UK had UKV and a game for the Netherlands has a HOL code. Being a Dutch collector, I want my games in the HOL version, and the special thing about the ROB, *Gyromite* big box and *Stack-Up* big box is that they are all in the HOL code variant. I bought all three from fellow Dutch collectors, who, in turn, bought them from the original owners at flea markets.

What condition was it in and how much did you pay?
All three items are in extremely good condition considering their age. I don't want to give away the exact numbers, but let's say that you could buy yourself a brand new high-end laptop for these three… and then take your family out to dinner. If you want to see the condition of these items and see everything that comes with them in detail, check out my video on YouTube: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=gotrVvN5Jr8**

What do you think of ROB to use?
I tried it once, but I honestly don't have the patience to play a game with ROB. If you're not familiar with how he plays, he literally takes minutes to complete a simple action! Playing a single game of *Stack-Up* or *Gyromite* with ROB takes your entire afternoon.

Finally, would you ever consider selling it?
These three items are among the highlights of my collection and will never be for sale!

THE BEST RETRO BITS FROM RETRO CITY RAMPAGE

We point out the best retro references from Brian Provinciano's awesome 8-bit GTA clone

BRIAN PROVINCIANO'S *RETRO City Rampage* started off life all the way back in 2002. Then known as *Grand Theftendo*, it was a homebrew project for the NES that saw Provinciano attempting to rebuild Rockstar's massively ambitious *Grand Theft Auto III* on Nintendo's humble 8-bit console. As Provinciano continued with his labour of love, he began adding characters from his favourite films and games, making it as much an ode to his childhood as it was a remake of Rockstar's game.

He eventually decided that his long-running project was strong enough to stand on its own two feet, switching to work on the project full-time and giving it its own plot, as well as a new name: *Retro City Rampage*.

The end result is not only a fun take on Rockstar's massively popular series, albeit in 2D form, but also a nostalgic nod to all manner of classic games, from *Frogger* to *Mega Man 2*. Of course, it would be virtually impossible to note every single classic reference that appears in Provinciano's game, but we've done our best to highlight our favourites.

STREET FIGHTER

THERE ARE A couple of *Street Fighter* references that we've uncovered. A subtle one appears in one of the games you can play in Nolan's Arcade, which uses the familiar 'Here comes a new challenger' tune. The other is fan favourite Chun-Li, who acts as the main reporter for Theftropolis City. She appears in numerous parts of the game, with her function being to highlight major plot points.



RAD RACER

AS PLAYER – *RCR*'s protagonist – prepares for his final mission, a prompt comes up asking you to put on some 3D glasses – which actually work if you have a pair handy. The viewpoint then changes to a racing game, which is an almost identical reproduction of Square's NES hit, *Rad Racer*. The only real difference is you're riding a bike.

THE BEASTIE BOYS

ALTHOUGH BRIAN DECIDED to focus on games and films, he wasn't averse to chucking the odd music reference into *RCR*. One of the best is a cut-scene early on that features all the Beastie Boys in full *Sabotage* costumes. A doughnut-eating policeman even spells the joke out to you if you're not observant enough.

FROGGER

EARLY ON, PLAYER is asked to cross a busy freeway so that Jester can escape with his money. He points out how dangerous it is by mentioning a frog that's been crushed trying to cross the road.





CONTRA

CONTRA (OR PROBOTECTOR) was a popular game on the NES, so it should come as no surprise to see it feature in *RCR*. Early on, Player is required to infiltrate a secure building. In a direct nod to Konami's classic run-and-gun, he must shoot out security panels in the distance to close the electrical barriers.



COMPANIES

ATARI FEATURES HEAVILY, but there are plenty of other nods to various publishers, developers and non-gaming firms if you look hard enough. Some of the most obvious are Sixbucks Coffee (Starbucks), Theta West (Data East), Reeel Cheeesear's Pizza (Chuck E Cheese), MucasFlem (Lucasfilm) and iPomme (Apple).

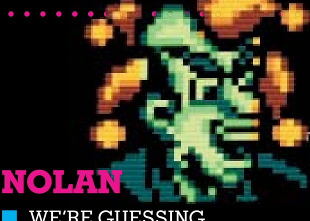
JOHN ROMERO

BRIAN IS OBVIOUSLY a big Romero fan, as the co-creator of *Doom* has his very own altar where Player can go to receive the cheat code that will grant you access to *RCR*'s 'God mode'. It's worth noting that it disables the saving function, though, so only use it if you want to have some fun.



KONAMI CODE

WHILE WE'RE ON the subject of cheat codes, entering the Konami code – up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A – unlocks all the weapons in the game.



NOLAN

WE'RE GUESSING PROVINCIANO is a fan of the famous director. The first part of *RCR* pays tribute to the opening scene of *The Dark Knight*, where the Joker – or Jester, as he's portrayed here – shoots useless henchmen and escapes from a bank heist by using a school bus and joining heavy traffic. Another nod is to *Inception*; when Player sleeps, he enters a mini-game called 'Killception', which requires him to kill as many people as possible before he wakes up.

MONKEY ISLAND

THERE ARE A few references to *Monkey Island* to be found in *RCR*. One of the first you'll come across is a shop called Guy Brush Paints, which is a clear nod to how the original name for *Monkey Island*'s hero came about. Later on in the game, you'll receive training from Gogbrush, this game's Guybrush proxy. You're also required to find the paw from a three-headed monkey in order to fix your time machine.





THE MAKING OF RETRO CITY RAMPAGE

We spoke to Brian Provinciano about the creation of his love letter to the Eighties

How does it feel now *RCR* is finally completed?

I still haven't given myself a moment to absorb things. It's an unfortunately anti-climax after years of blood, sweat and tears. I dreamed of a big party and celebrations, but when the day came I couldn't let myself take the downtime. Just getting back to normal sleeping hours and letting my body recover was the celebration in a sad sense [laughs].

Why did you decide to include videogame and film references?

I've been compelled to make my own games since the moment I began playing. Before I even knew how, I would draw imaginary levels on paper, then later on the computer. I vividly remember drawing mock-up *Sonic The Hedgehog* levels on my 286 PC.

In a way, it wasn't any different from how *GTA: Vice City* riffed off of *Scarface* and *Miami Vice*. As developers, we're greatly influenced by external interests, and the most prominent interests are games and films. In *RCR*, these things ended up snowballing and becoming much less subtle until they eventually became a defining part of the entire game.

The first happened when adding a bar. The thought of making it a homage to a classic adventure game became very exciting, if only so I could walk around this living, breathing city and interact with it. Fairly quickly after that, the idea of making a mission involving a nod to the protagonist from that game sparked my interest, and it never stopped.

Interestingly, though, the game wasn't a comedy at first; it had a more gritty tone. However, with the exception of when I'm completely destroyed from 20-hour days and a foot away from my deathbed, humour is what's running through my bloodstream. As the game became more and more about what interested me personally, it became an extension of me, and the humour was unavoidable.

RCR became packed with references, nostalgia, parodies, satire, social commentary, puns, public service announcements, inside jokes, memes and some classroom humour to evoke childhood memories. It's a 50-layer dip with something for everyone. Unlike big budget AAA games, a singular laser-like focus was never its vision. It's designed to be a buffet; a mish-mash of styles and humour. The downside of this was some reviewers cherry picking the elements they didn't like as opposed to basking in those they did, but I suppose that was unavoidable.

What are your favourite references?

The rainbow light-splattered Sixties superhero 'Croc Pit of Doom' mission is my favourite visually. It plays off the supervillain deathtrap while looking like a soundstage mashed up with nods to a couple of other things as well.

The reason for the time travelling theme wasn't because it makes sense, being that the game is a self-referential time capsule; it sparked from how funny I thought it would have been if Bill and Ted's phone booth had landed on someone. The scene based on that idea was the seed for which things became built around initially.

The official *Bit.Trip: Runner*-based minigame was one of the most fun to develop. I've wanted to make a rhythm game since *Dance Dance Revolution* came out. It was the perfect fit, and Gaijin Games were so cool about it. I worked very closely with Freaky DNA, who composed the audio for it.

The real-life film, TV and industry personalities were also a nice touch. They gave me the opportunity to do cheesy sitcom-style cameos to add another layer of nostalgia. On top of that, it was cool to be able to honour some of my childhood heroes!

There are also a significant amount of references in the game to the city I live in (Vancouver). Some missions tread on black humour due to their social commentary. Most players will have no idea, but I wouldn't change a thing. Many told me I should focus on mainstream references, but then it wouldn't have been a personal project. The references aren't there to pander; they're there because they mean something to me.

> "THE GAME BECAME AN EXTENSION OF ME, SO THE HUMOUR WAS UNAVOIDABLE"

How many references in total did you include?

I've definitely lost track, but there was a time when I did a report outlining every one for legal. Being full of references, we had a few lawyers double check everything to make sure nothing was too far over the edge.

Were there any games you wanted to add but couldn't?

From the beginning, I wanted to add hills and ramps so that it could feature *Excite Bike*-style stunts. However, I also knew it would have been too much work, not just development-wise, but art-wise. Everything needs to be manually drawn because it's pixel art, so it would have been no easy task. It turned out there were more than enough ways to spin missions without the need for it, but it sure would have been cool.

Did you have to seek permission from publishers?

Never. The mainstream references aren't detailed enough to be an issue. When you look at references at a glance, such as the Player's lightgun, it may remind you of another iconic one, but if you compare them side by side they're nothing alike.

Do you have any plans for a sequel?

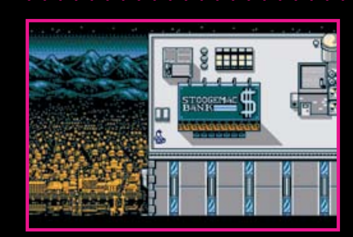
Not at the moment. I feel that the story's been told. This is my childhood in a box. I'd love to do more open-world games in the future, but they would have different themes and visual styles. My body also needs a big rest and downtime.





BILL & TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

EARLY ON, YOU kick Bill and Ted out of their time machine. When you meet up with your future self, you ask him what number he's thinking of. He replies: "69, dude!"



MEGA MAN 2

THE MOST POPULAR *Mega Man* NES game receives a short, tongue-in-cheek reference. As *RCR* begins in earnest, it features the falling scrawl, "...And so in the year 2012, the most overused parody", before finishing at the top of a skyscraper where a security guard is keeping watch, the wind blowing through his hair in a classy tribute to Capcom's forgotten mascot.

DUCK HUNT

AS THE SECURITY guard is standing watch, a duck flies by and is immediately shot, causing *Duck Hunt*'s Mr Peepers to immediately pop up and start laughing.



THE DEPARTED/MORTAL KOMBAT

THERE'S A DOUBLE hitter on this one. During the bank heist, a henchman in a getaway car crashes, complaining that he won't be home for dinner in a nod to Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*. As the crash causes a giant explosion, a digitised version of *Mortal Kombat*'s sound designer, Dan Forden, pops up and shouts out, "Toasty!"

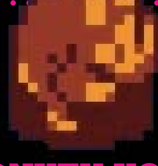


PUNCH-OUT!!

PLAYER IS REQUESTED to get hold of a push bike so he can go on a mission. He's directed to Bugeye Louie to get one. Upon arriving inside, you see a boxing ring and Bugeye Louie himself in an obvious reference to *Punch-Out!!*'s Doc Louis.

SKATE OR DIE

THERE ARE PLENTY of shops that Player can visit while he's in Theftropolis. The Skate N Buy grants him access to a handy skateboard, and is a clear reference to Electronic Art's first in-house game.



DONKEY KONG

AT ONE POINT Doc Choc wants you to retrieve an ape-like vehicle that looks suspiciously like Nintendo's Donkey Kong. The reference is driven home further when Doc Choc reveals that he's probably taken the APE (Android Primate Electric XT-2000 Roadster) to the docks so that he can "ship it overseas and manufacture bootlegs" – something that happened to the original game.



KNIGHT RIDER

ONE MISSION SEES Player having to secure a number of vehicles for Vanilla T-Cuuuuuuuube, who is himself a parody of Ice Cube and Vanilla Ice. The first vehicle happens to be *Knight Rider*'s KITT. To hammer the point home, a singing David Hasselhoff appears, mentioning that he's left a cheeseburger inside the car you're now trying to steal.



SCOOBY-DOO

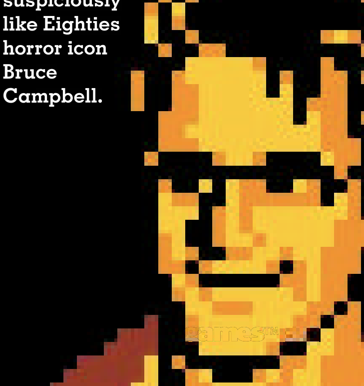
THE NEXT CAR Player has to steal is a familiar-looking van. As he goes to apprehend it, he's assaulted by none other than Norville 'Shaggy' Rogers. Interestingly, Scooby is nowhere to be seen.

PEE-WEE HERMAN

THE FINAL VEHICLE Player acquires is a bike parked outside a cinema. It belongs to Pee-Wee Herman, who rages at Player as he rides off. The cinema is showing two parodies: *Ernest Gets Rabies* and *Trek Wars: The Search For Spock.*

BRUCE CAMPBELL

AS PLAYER RETRIEVES another object for his time machine, he discovers that it's owned by someone who looks suspiciously like Eighties horror icon Bruce Campbell.





GHOSTBUSTERS

■ ONE LARGE SECTION of *RCR*'s plot revolves around Player joining up with the Go-Go Busters. He goes on a number of missions for them, which range from retrieving Ecto-1 to busting numerous ghosts. Why? Because bustin' makes you feel good.



TAPPER

■ WHEN PLAYER JOINS the Go-Go Busters, he has to take part in a mini-game that's reminiscent of *Tapper*. He has a set number of barrels filled with ionised root beer and must throw them onto each Ion Tapper AS5 to shut them down.

SAVED BY THE BELL

■ **BRIAN PROVINCIANO IS obviously a big fan of *Saved By The Bell*, as several of the game's missions are based around it. The levels feature numerous characters from the show, including hapless principal Richard Belding (now Balding), Zack Morris (Duke Norris) and Screech (Squeak). Player also uses Zack's famous fourth-wall-breaking 'Time Out' to ask who Duke's sexy girlfriend is. There's even some canned laughter thrown in for good measure.**



NES ZAPPER

■ **THE ICONIC NES lightgun is picked up by Player at the end of the game. It's an incredibly powerful laser gun that destroys vehicles and people with one hit. To cap it off, whenever anyone does get killed by it, they're enveloped in a flashing white square, just like with the original hardware.**



HOT COFFEE

■ AFTER PLAYER BEATS up Duke Norris, there's a nice little nod to *GTA: San Andreas*'s controversial Hot Coffee mod. Player drives Duke's girlfriend Kimmy back to her apartment. Once there, a censored bar appears to hide the on-screen action that is taking place.



NES PAD

■ **WHEN YOU HIJACK Bill and Ted's time machine, you can see that a huge NES pad makes up a large part of the console. A smaller pad is used as some sort of controller for the time-travelling contraption.**





BATMAN

■ IN ADDITION TO paying tribute to *The Dark Knight*, *RCR* parodies the original *Batman* TV show. One mission requires Player to follow Biffman by tailing him back to his base. Once Player takes over as Biffman, he gets captured by his former employee, who sets an elaborate *Batman*-style trap.

PITFALL!

■ THE ICONIC ACTIVISION game's crocodiles pop up throughout *RCR*, but the most notable nod to David Crane's classic game is when Player (as Biffman) gets caught by Jester and must escape from the elaborate Vine Pit 2600. It's an elaborate trap, which requires him to swing on an ever-descending rope, catch the baddies and feed them to the waiting crocs.





COMMANDO

■ **ONE OF PLAYER'S early missions requires him to mow down a load of enemy soldiers and use their grenades to blow up a nearby gate. If this isn't a nod to Capcom's *Commando* we'll eat our hats.**

CARTRIDGE CLEANING KIT

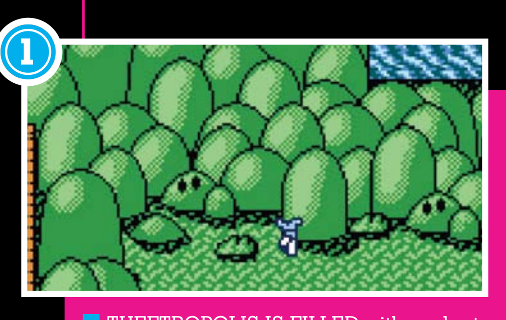
■ THE NES AND other consoles were well known for suffering from dirty connection points, so cleaning kits were essential. A NES cleaning kit is one of the items needed to power the time machine. Another nod is when Player first takes the time machine. There's a sign advising to use the cleaning kit if problems ensue, but it's been overlaid by a sticker saying, 'Just blow on it'.



IT'S A ME! MARIO?

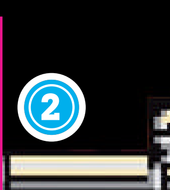
MARIO WAS THE poster child for the NES, and as a result we've uncovered more references to Nintendo's popular plumber than any other. It's possible that there are more hidden around the huge city of Theftropolis, but these are the ones that we've found so far…

1



THEFTROPOLIS IS FILLED with verdant green hills with the same eyes as the ones found in the *Super Mario Bros* games.

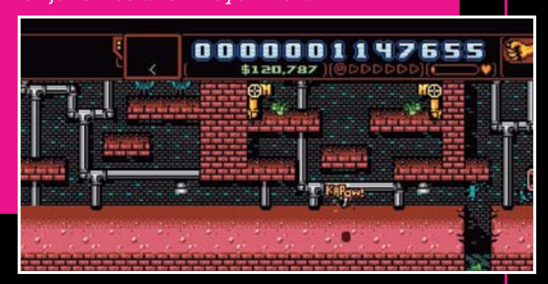
2



EARLY ON IN the game, Player must escape a crime scene with Jester, so he jumps down a warp pipe and into a sewer.

3

THE SEWER HAS a 'POW' Block, which floors all the on-screen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles when Player hits it.



4

WHEN PLAYER IS investigating another sewer later on in the game, he's attacked by a radioactive plumber, who happens to be a dead ringer for Mario.

5



MARIO'S BROTHER LUIGI also makes an appearance in *RCR*. He's called Loogie, and runs one of the shops in Theftropolis.

6

ONE OF THE mini-games found in *RCR* is nearly identical to the spinning faces mini-game that features in *Super Mario Bros 3* on the NES.



7

STAYING WITH SUPER *Mario Bros 3* for the moment, one of the power-ups that Player can use is a direct copy of the Raccoon Suit found in the hit platformer.

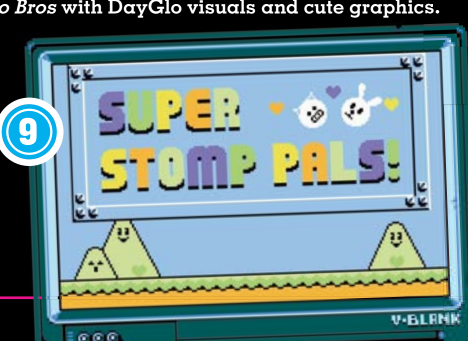
8



SUPER MARIO BROS 2 was a Mario re-skin of *Doki Doki Panic*. A billboard references the game in *Retro City Rampage*.

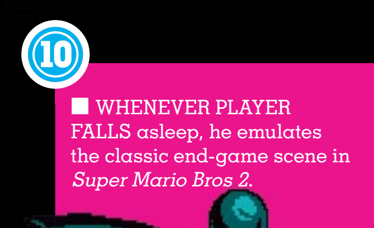
9

A GAME CALLED Super Stomp Pals is *Super Mario Bros* with DayGlo visuals and cute graphics.



10

WHENEVER PLAYER FALLS asleep, he emulates the classic end-game scene in *Super Mario Bros 2*.



11

AND FINALLY… THERE are warp pipes with bonus caves filled with lots of hidden coins to collect.







NOLAN BUSHNELL

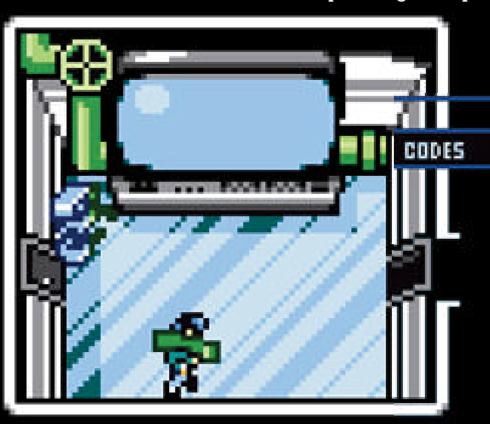
■ THERE ARE A few nods to the co-founder of Atari. The most obvious is Nolan's Arcade, a place Player can visit to play several games. There's also a reference to Chuck E Cheese's and Atari.

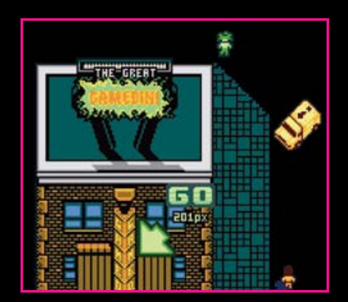
PRO WRESTLING

■ WHEN PLAYER IS first learning how to use weapons, he does it in a wrestling ring that is nigh-on identical to the one in NES hit *Pro Wrestling*.

ROB

■ ONE OF THE robots guarding a code in the Impossible Mission tower is ROB, Nintendo's Robotic Operating Buddy.



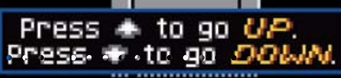


GAME GENIE

■ WHEN DOC CHOC has trouble tracking down certain items, he asks the great Gamedini, who knows many of Theftropolis' secrets. Doc Choc warns Player that Gamedini is unlicensed in an obvious reference to the infamous Codemasters Game Genie copyright trial.

IMPOSSIBLE MISSION

■ GAMEDINI INFORMS PLAYER that special codes he needs are found in a certain building. Player must take the elevator to each floor and find the hidden key. Once found, he must then input the code Impossible Mission-style while avoiding the many robots guarding the tower.



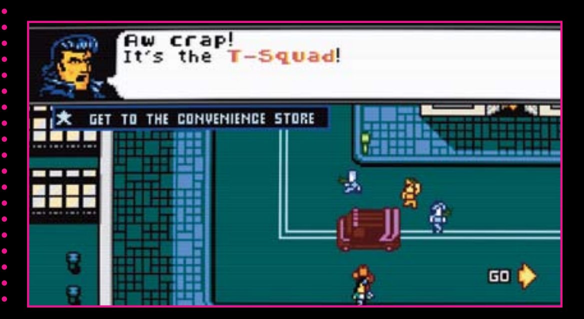


GAUNTLET

■ WHEN THE DOC gets captured, Player has to go looking for him. Unfortunately for Player, his quarry has been hidden in a huge maze that's crawling with skulls, enemies and *Gauntlet*-style treasure chests. After an initial search reveals no key, Player uses a rocket launcher to blast through walls so he can escape.

EIGHTIES ACTION HEROES

■ AT THE BEGINNING of the game, Player is assaulted by numerous action heroes from the Eighties as he makes his desperate escape. First, he's attacked by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, who follow him out of the sewers he tried sneaking through. He's then hit by the A-Team's van and proceeds to get mobbed by Hannibal and the rest of his gang, but is able to easily dispatch them. Last, but by no means least, is a huge helicopter, which drops Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone into the fray.



BACK TO THE FUTURE

■ THE VAST MAJORITY of *RCR*'s plot pays tribute to Robert Zemeckis' *Back To The Future*. While Player doesn't end up trying to avoid the clutches of his teenage mum, he does get involved in a barmy time travel plot that involves a souped-up DeLorean and a character called Doc Choc, who's the spitting image of Doc Brown. Great Scott!

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

■ *ZELDA* WAS A massively popular NES game, and it gets a suitable number of references in *RCR*. The bottom-right corner of Theftropolis' map features a green area with a cave that is almost identical to the visuals seen in the classic NES game. Enter the cave there, and you'll see it's also set up in exactly the same way. Upon going inside, Player receives a sword and shield and is told to hit things to discover hidden secrets. Finally, we found a seemingly unreachable heart, which can be seen in the waters of Theftropolis' harbour.





SMASH TV

■ **AT CERTAIN STAGES of *RCR*, Player is thrown into deadly arenas that require him to take out dozens of enemies with whatever weapon he has to hand. The layout is a dead ringer for Eugene Jarvis' cult Nineties blaster. All that's missing is Mutoid Man.**



METAL GEAR SOLID

■ THE ADVENTURES OF Solid Snake are also heavily sent up in Brian Provinciano's game. You initially meet Major Lee in an armoury shop, where he has a mission for you. Said quest involves using cover to sneak past soldiers when they're not looking so you can get to a nearby truck. There's a similar level later on when you must again sneak past soldiers after infiltrating AT Corp. Two final touches are Major greeting you in a cardboard box and a message from him stating, "I was feel slept", in a direct reference to the now-infamous "I feel asleep" from the poorly localised original NES game. Oh, and there's a shop called Sneaky Snake Box & Crate.

LEE MAJORS

■ **WHILE WE'RE ON the subject of *Metal Gear*, Major Lee is clearly a reference to Lee Majors, who starred as the awesome Colt Seavers in the classic Eighties TV show *The Fall Guy*.**

GAME BOY

■ THERE ARE LOTS of different graphical filters in *RCR*. The Super Video Brick filter emulates Nintendo's original Game Boy, giving everything a monochromatic sheen.



DR ROBOTNIK

■ ASIDE FROM A line about some fast running shoes that came from the 'Green Hills', there aren't many *Sonic* references in *RCR*. One of the biggest, however, also doubles up as the game's main boss. Dr Von Buttnik is an obvious reference to Dr Robotnik, and antagonises Player at several key points of the game. He normally fights Player in an egg-like contraption similar to the devices he pilots in the classic Mega Drive games, and has a particularly impressive weapon for your final battle with him.



INDIE GAMES

■ **INSIDE NOLAN'S ARCADE are several retro-style games. Virtual Meat Boy is an into-the-screen endless runner featuring Meat Boy which emulates the style of a Virtual Boy, complete with optional 3D. There's also a fun cut-down version of Gaijin Games' *Bit.Trip Runner* and another game called Epic Meal Time, which has you trying to eat creations from the popular Canadian culinary show.**



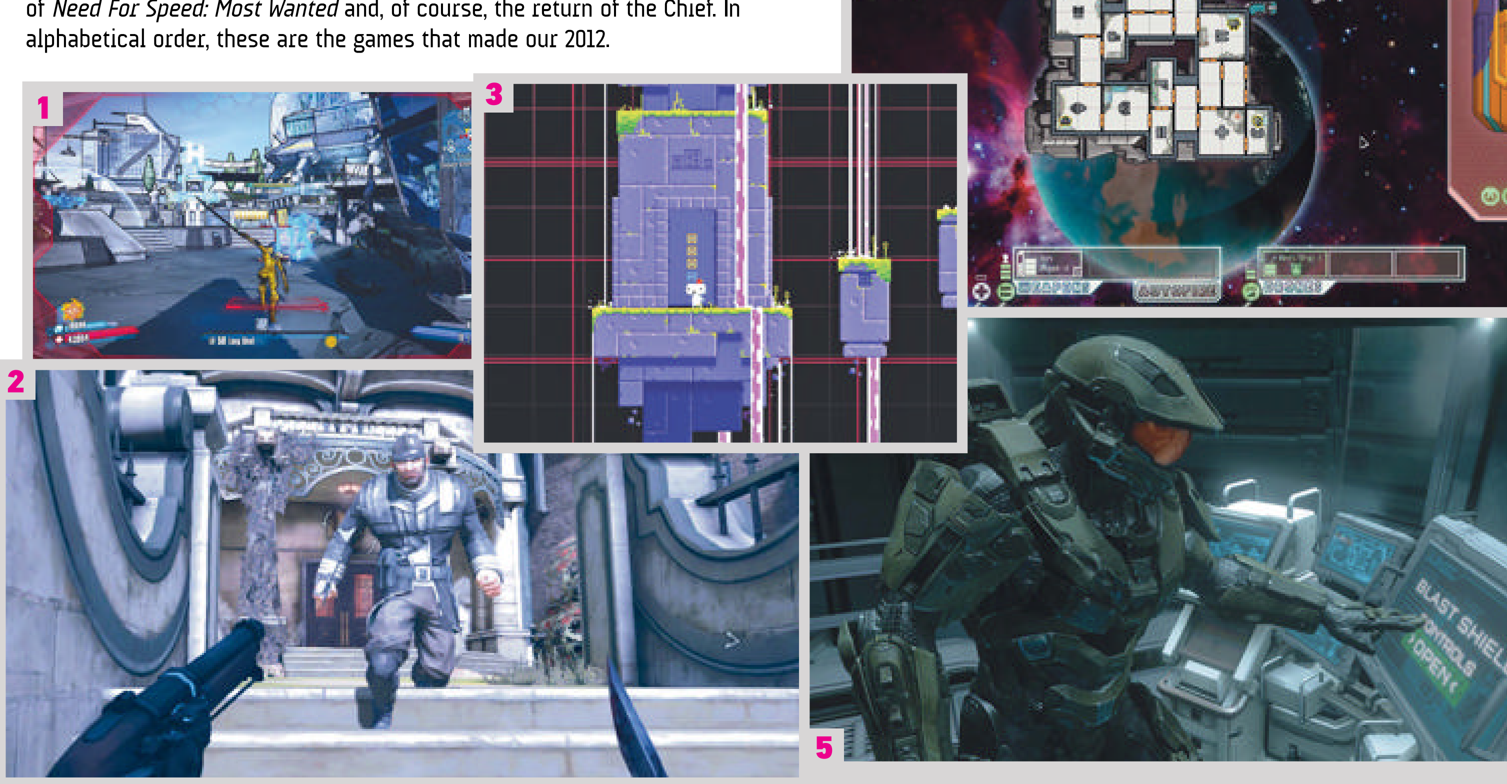
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

■ WE'LL FINISH WITH the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, as they pop up a few times. We mentioned that they briefly appear during the intro, but there's another sequence later where you must speed through the sewers in a truck that looks suspiciously like a level from the Turtles' NES game. Another mission later in the game sees Player getting a request to flood them out of their home by a Shredder lookalike. Player must do this by swimming through an insanely tough underwater level, setting bombs along the way. Graphically, it looks almost identical to the original NES game. It's just as unfair as well.

ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BEST GAMES RELEASED IN 2012

In a year that saw two consoles debut, the true innovations came from the indie scene. The last couple of months has seen some of the most compelling experiences of 2012 in *The Unfinished Swan* and *FTL: Faster Than Light*, not to mention *Fez* and *Journey* earlier in the year. The benchmark was equally high among the pre-Christmas behemoths: the crazy *Borderlands 2*, the urban sprawl of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted* and, of course, the return of the Chief. In alphabetical order, these are the games that made our 2012.



Borderlands 2
See: tinyurl.com/co37zpk
Developer: Gearbox Software

1 It's hard to think of another game in the last few years that has so fervently nurtured co-operative gaming. Gearbox Software's sequel has no less than reinvigorated the first-person shooter, shifting the focus away from scripted sequences and linear pathways, instead delving into the multiplayer side of the genre that doesn't involve getting n00bed by a ten-year-old. It's not just the added incentive of working together for extra XP boosts that compels players to continue exploring *Borderlands 2*, but the richly detailed world is so affectionately drawn that it's almost impossible to resist its many splendours.

Dishonored
See: tinyurl.com/c69csoz
Developer: Arkane Studios

2 At a time when publishers busy themselves pondering over the viability of new IPs, *Dishonored* arrived as a bold statement. There's an incomparable sense of freedom among the self-contained levels, and the delights of experimentation make return visits almost compulsory. Rarely does a game reward so proportionately to the investment, and *Dishonored*'s deliciously old-school mechanics are so tightly constructed that the possibilities are seemingly endless. It's a puffed-up claim, but one that here feels wholly appropriate.

Fez
See: tinyurl.com/cwwz9dp
Developer: Polytron

3 Hats off to Phil Fish. In a year when a few ill-thought comments could have engulfed his long-awaited platformer, *Fez* proved so utterly charming and nostalgic that it transcended all controversy surrounding the developer. Beyond the genuine ingenuity of the core concept, it's the range of creative solutions to head-spinning conundrums, sumptuous aesthetics and incontrovertible understanding of its influences that make it a success. While its more buried features come across as obtuse and slightly self-indulgent, it's hard to deny *Fez*'s accomplishment.

FTL: Faster Than Light
See: Issue 129
Developer: Subset Games

4 Kickstarter was the year's biggest surprise. It became an unparalleled resource for upstart developers to gain funding for passion projects. The first videogame success story, *FTL: Faster Than Light*, wasn't the most high-profile of projects to raise funding on the site, but it's certainly one of the most deeply involving. To say that Subset Games has mastered space combat would be an understatement, crafting suspenseful core play that consistently inspires quick thinking and deep regret. You won't find a more bittersweet balance of life-affirming and soul-destroying gameplay.

Halo 4
See: tinyurl.com/cccr3jo
Developer: 343 Industries

5 You could argue that 343 Industries had an impossible task on its hands. As the new custodian of the *Halo* franchise, the studio had the unenviable job of remaining reverent to Bungie's console-defining franchise, while innovating enough not to resemble a complete retread. It might not have fully succeeded on the latter point, but *Halo 4* is undeniably an authentic experience, featuring the series' most inventive set pieces to date and a real lust to push Master Chief into unexplored territory.



Journey
See: tinyurl.com/7ea98lt
Developer: thatgamecompany

6 Since the day the PlayStation 3 launched, Sony has nurtured creative talent in the digital realm with unrivalled enthusiasm, and *Journey* proved to be PSN's crowning achievement in 2012. It's a game that asserts from the very moment you enter it's isolated desert landscape that less is more, and it's hard to disagree. *Journey*'s success is not just the simplicity to its design and compelling narrative, but it's the stirring resonance that will leave you quietly reflecting on its majesty for days after completion that is unlike anything else we've played this year.

Need For Speed: Most Wanted
See: tinyurl.com/bowotwl
Developer: Criterion Games

7 Criterion is nothing if not wholly reliable. After last year's misfire that was *Need For Speed: The Run*, EA has placed the franchise under the supervision of the *Burnout Paradise* developer, and that very title has served as the guiding influence behind *Most Wanted*. It's a confident performance, encompassing all of the automotive thrills of the studio's lineage under the more bombastic trappings of the *Need For Speed* name. The intense racing and joyously chaotic structure of online multiplayer might be *Most Wanted*'s main appeal, but the sheer delight in exploring the refined open world refuses to grow tiresome.

The Unfinished Swan
See: tinyurl.com/c3n7yla
Developer: Giant Sparrow

8 A delicately assembled narrative driven by arresting visual ideas, *The Unfinished Swan* is an enrapturing experience; one you'll be reluctant to depart as it nears its climax. The ideas on show are truly exceptional, stretching beyond the initial paint-the-world-black conceit and into the cerebral puzzle-solving that recalls early *Portal*. It's another testament to the power of the digital marketplace that enables such creative expressionism to flourish. It ends a triumphant year for Sony in the digital domain.

WipEout 2048
See: Issue 119
Developer: Studio Liverpool

9 Studio Liverpool can hold its head up high. *WipEout 2048* was the undisputed standout of the PlayStation Vita launch line-up, and while Sony closed one of its longest-running first-party studios earlier in the year, it doesn't detract from what it achieved here. Few Vita titles can profess to utilising the handheld's multifaceted functionality to such great and relevant lengths. A visual feast, and no other racer quite instils the same thrilling sense of speed as *WipEout*. *2048* ended Studio Liverpool's collaboration on a high.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown
See: tinyurl.com/c7eopwr
Developer: Firaxis Games

10 There is no other game this year that demanded to be played more than *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. It was as innovative as it is reverential – Julian Gollop couldn't have asked for a more respectful remake of his 1994 turn-based strategy classic. There's a crushing cruelty to the design, but one made more rewarding by careful management and rendered tragic by the close affinity felt for your squad. Perhaps the most impressive aspect is how it demands gamers revaluate the genre, making a tactical strategy game as scintillating as any first-person shooter.



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Hands-on with Storm Legion, Rift's first expansion
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TRION WORLDS
gamesTM talks to the minds behind Rift about the new expansion
INTERVIEWED
CITY OF STEAM
Mystery and magic move onto the browser as Mechanist Games prepares to release its long-awaited free-to-play adventure

The Channeler class has a nifty line in top hats, but there are a whole lot of snazzy outfits available in this fantasy steampunk universe.

City Of Steam

IS IT AN MMO OR AN RPG? IT'S DEFINITELY A GAS

Despite their huge success, MMOs have never felt mainstream; often they've only appealed to the most hardcore gamers. They're expensive, and they soon develop impenetrable social structures, offputting to new players. *City Of Steam* is even more outré – it's a free-to-play steampunk RPG/ MMO from an unknown new studio based in provincial China – and it's only playable in your web browser.

Yet, perhaps because of that bizarre origin, it's pretty original. The game is set in a high-tech world – literally. The 'planet' on which the game occurs is a series of cogs rotating in space, with the living races occupying the faces of the gears. Similarly, the technology the people of this World Machine use is, and has always been, steampunk – iron and grease and pistons and steam. It's reminiscent of the novels of HG Wells or China Mieville, with many races living in seething disharmony on a packed, alien world.

"It's not high fantasy," says Gabriel LaForge, the game's personable marketing editor. "Like zombies, we feel that's been overdone." At the heart of this world, is the city of Nexus, one of the oldest cities on the planet, built around a crashed ark spaceship from the ancients who built the World Machine in an attempt to flee a catastrophe they'd foreseen in the far future. It's where your character eventually ends up – he or she has to escape from the city of Delton as the game starts and an off-world catastrophe called 'The Brood' strikes. "Though the game takes place mainly in Nexus, there's a huge range of environments to explore. You don't feel like you're confined to this small area. Our longest area is Meluan's Road, which is a good place to race steam bikes".

Like *Dragon Age* or *Guild Wars 2*, depending on your choice of the ten races – four human, the rest steampunk/fantasy orcs, dwarves, and so forth – you'll get a different origin story and introduction quest for your character, with different in-game choices affecting your path through the world and whether you're working to resurrect or bury Nexus.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: Mechanist
DEVELOPER: In-house
ORIGIN: China



THOUGH THERE ARE just four classes in the beta phase of the game at the moment, they're all based firmly in the world's mythos. So while it's obvious to see how the ranged Gunner and the heavily armoured Warder might fit in with a steampunk world, the seemingly magical Arcanist actually draws his powers from the World Machine itself, and the mystical Channelers actually harmonise their prayers with the machine's movements. "It's not just 'It's magic, don't ask'," explains LaForge. "It's drawn from the mechanisms, wavelengths from the machine itself."

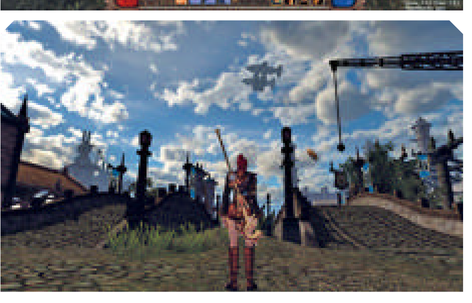
Unlike in most MMOs, though, the team has tried to make it as much an RPG as an MMO. They don't mind if it's played solo and the game doesn't either. So, alone on a private server booted up for us, we ran around a perfectly good RPG world and didn't miss the crowds of other players as we whacked ratlings and dismantled malfunctioning subterranean mechanisms. Fighting enemies was as intuitive and as rigid as any MMO, but the quests were as well written and original as *Guild Wars 2* or *World Of Warcraft* itself. "We don't mind

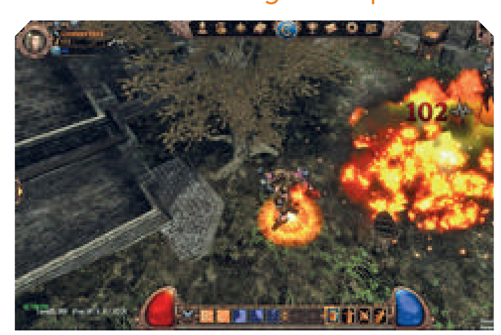


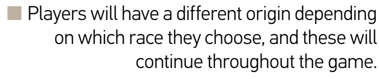
Three of the playable races are greenskins – Orcs, Goblins and Hobbes.

Gunners have a choice of three weapon sets.

"We don't mind when people call us a WoW clone. We're not, but we do take it as a huge compliment"







Players will have a different origin depending on which race they choose, and these will continue throughout the game.

when people call us a *WoW* clone," says LaForge. "We're not, but we do take it as a huge compliment."

Similarly, the range of specialities available to each class means they rapidly diverge. Our Stoigmari Gunner was a long-ranged single target rifle specialist, but he could have easily chosen duelling pistols or focused on mass damage.

As a 3D browser-based game running in Unity, there are hard limits to how beautiful the developers can make *City Of Steam*. It's probably at a similar graphical level as *World Of Warcraft* – a game released in 2004, remember. Despite these limitations, the world design is absolutely exemplary for an MMO, possibly due to the depth of the fiction that has been created, possibly due to the love the team are pouring into the game. "First we focused on making the game, then we started looking out there for our competition," says LaForge, "and we've found nothing that comes close. If they look this good, they're normally 3GB of downloads."

On top of that the lack of download, the absence of installation, patching or loading is a boon, and it really makes us think that all games will be this way one day. "We have the content of a normal triple-A title," claims LaForge. "We have the graphics – and it's just a couple of megabytes to play." LaForge is cautiously optimistic about changing players' perceptions of browser games with *City Of Steam*. "If we can get this out in time and not get too many copycats," he posits, "we can show that browser games don't have to be huge client games or Facebook crap – they can just be good games." Let's hope Mechanist doesn't run out of steam.

THE DEVELOPERS

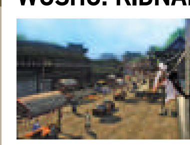
Mechanist Games is based in the Chinese city of Xiamen – incidentally, the same city that features heavily in Neal Stephenson's *Reamde*, a book about MMOs, terrorism and Chinese hackers. Though the team is based in China, it's a mix of locals and international workers, and the game itself is purely for the Western market.

Oddly, the biggest name and hardest worker at Mechanist is the studio founder, games veteran David Lindsay. He's composed the music, led the art direction, done some area design, acted as the game's lead designer while being general manager of the company, and has written three books set in the World Machine, alongside a pen-and-paper role-playing system. That's one hard-working developer.

MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

WUSHU: KIDNAPPED!



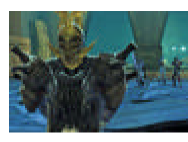
Forthcoming martial arts MMO *Age Of Wushu* has revealed a very strange mechanic along with the start of its closed beta. When players log off from the game, they can become NPCs, earning money and experience in menial in-game jobs. Other players can then knock out and kidnap these NPCs, carrying them in big black sacks around the city, to sell them for big money to other shopkeepers. The more honourable players can attempt to intercept these thieves.

THIS MONTH'S LAUNCHES



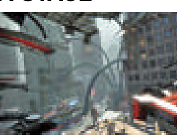
Cabal Online, *RaiderZ* and *Darkfall: Unholy Wars* have launched. *Cabal* is an old Korean MMORPG, so probably best dodged. The annoyingly named *RaiderZ* is a posh-looking *Monster Hunter*-style MMO where you can grab bits of enemies to use as weapons – might be worth a go. And *Unholy Wars* is a reboot of the revolutionary, ultra-hardcore griefing MMO.

SWTOR F2P



Star Wars: The Old Republic has finally relaunched as a free-to-play game. Free players are limited to just three races, slower XP progression, no free resurrections and a host of other strictures that make the game even more boring. Our verdict: avoid.

THE (SECRET) WORLD'S A STAGE



The wonderfully written but doomed contemporary MMO *The Secret World* revealed lots of stuff this month: its first raid, which takes place on the streets of New York; a new weapon set including chainsaws; and… a theatre? Apparently, in-game roleplaying has reached the point where players want to perform plays in front of other players.

■ Aside from *Rift*, developer Trion is currently developing three other MMOs, including *End Of Nations* and *Defiance*.

Rift: Storm Legion

TRION ENTERS A NEW DIMENSION WITH ITS INAUGURAL MMO

While *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *DC Universe Online* grabbed all the attention in 2011, *Rift* was under most people's radars. Yet it was the only MMORPG from that year that actually survived as a paying game. Others failed to capture enough players, went free-to-play or shut down entirely, like the once-vaunted space MMO *Black Prophecy*. Even *SWTOR* has finally bitten the F2P bullet.

So how has *Rift* managed to continue and not just thrive but release one of the biggest expansion packs for any MMO around, the mammoth *Storm Legion*? Obviously, there's something in the ethos of the two founders, who brought experience from EA and NCsoft and decided to make the best platform for running MMOs ever, and in the game's emphasis on highly customisable, flexible characters and open-world events. But there must be more to their success than that.

Hal Hanlin, design producer on *Rift*, tells us more: "We have put a lot of time and effort into changing what the world should expect from an MMO. It's about treating it like a service. We have released more amazing content over the last 18 months than most companies put into a boxed expansion. In that same timeframe, we tripled the size of the game with *Storm Legion*."

It's true that what's kept *Rift* going is how frequently Trion has been updating it. Most MMOs introduce major content expansions every six to twelve months; Trion has been introducing significant new content that advances the story and world every two months for the last two years. "We have the best tools I have ever heard of, so we can generate content quickly to fill the needed gaps," says Hanlin.

On top of that extra content, the designers have been getting rid of elements that don't work, and nothing is sacred. "We're never afraid to make hard calls," says Hanlin. "If something is not working for our players, even if it was a brilliant idea, we have changed it or cut it. We play this game, too. We hear the chats and feel the same emotions, and we are willing to do what it takes to keep making *Rift* better." Much of that comes from the variety of the team, spanning every type of player, from PvE solo gamers to PvP fanatics. As Hanlin says, "When your CFO is a raider, you know you work at a real game company."

AS HANLIN INTIMATED, *Storm Legion* itself is a huge expansion, trebling the size of the existing world of Telara by adding two new deserted continents, Dusken and Brevane, packed with giant enemies, fresh out of *Shadow Of The Colossus*. It also allows the two factions to play together, group together and form guilds together, as well as adding more souls to *Rift*'s comically complicated, super-flexible class system.

INFORMATION

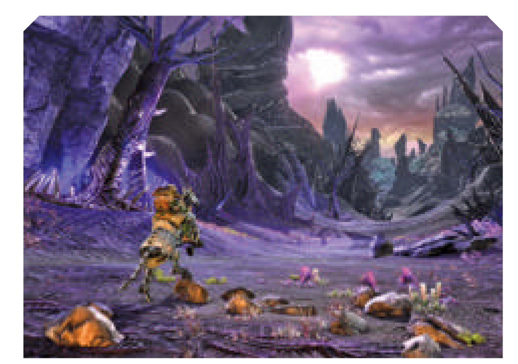
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Trion**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **US**





Rift doesn't lack inventiveness when it comes to the scope of its creatures, not to mention character design.

"The main complaint I hear is that people can't decide whether to level or build. That's a first-world MMO problem"



The dead parts of Dusken are a stark, barren landscape to visit.

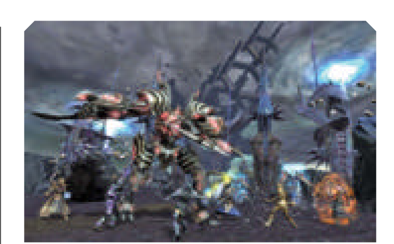


The new Hunt Rifts allow players to drag more powerful enemies into the game to fight, while the Onslaught mode adds a tower defence element to the game. On top of that, there is a new level cap of 60 and there are new Dimensions, which are combat-free player-made areas. "The main complaint I hear is that people can't decide whether to level or build," says Hanlin. "That's a first-world MMO problem."

The early responses to the content update have been positive. Despite criticisms about the somewhat simplistic storytelling, the divergent design of the dead areas of Dusken and the overgrown cities of Brevane, and the new features have won players over. Of course, Trion isn't resting on its laurels. It's also working on three other games, the first being *End Of Nations*, an MMORTS from the original *Command & Conquer* team, which has been suffering delays. The second is the comically named *Warface*, developed by Crytek, a free-to-play multiplayer shooter, targeted straight at Call Of Duty's players.

The third is the ambitious Defiance. This isn't ambitious in its setting, which is doing the same thing for the sci-fi MMORPG that *Rift* did for fantasy, but in its mechanics – *Call Of Duty* meets *Counter-Strike* PvP plus PvE in a huge post-apocalyptic Earth – and in its tied-in TV show. Yes, *Defiance* will launch at the same time as a new show on SyFy, with in-game content released weekly to tie in with the show's storylines.

So Trion, not Blizzard, is the company to watch in the MMO space. With *Rift* it's proven its expertise, and with its other titles, Trion is showing that it knows where the gaming world is going and thinks it can be one step ahead. Its only problem with *Rift* that we can see is the speed that it's been killing the world's big bosses – the dragon gods of the alternate dimensions. "As we developed the notion of the dragons, we also knew that bad guys eventually have to die," says Hanlin, "so we have some very clear ideas of what the next threats are to our world are. Fear not!"



Robot suits! No game is complete without them, not even a fantasy.

SOUL MUSIC

Rift has the MMO world's best class system – a complex arrangement where players choose a class and combine three out of nine souls into their own custom archetype. The new souls that Trion introduced with *Storm Legion* completely change up how each class operates. For example, the Harbinger soul turns the mage into a melee tank, while the Tempest turns a warrior into a long-ranged sniper, the Tactician turns the rogue into a healer, and the Defiler turns the cleric into something that corrupts as it heals.



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Naoki Yoshida

Director and producer of Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn isn't an expansion or patch for the critically panned MMO, but a brand new game altogether. Discussing the dramatic redirection, Naoki Yoshida assures us that this is the game the fans have been waiting for

A *Realm Reborn* forgoes the whimsical presentation for a darker and more urgent design. Was this a conscious transformation to the series?
There is a place for both light fantasy and dark fantasy, and we want to incorporate both of those into the game. But I do realise, personally, that a lot of recent *Final Fantasy* games had a very light and whimsical feel – I want to go back into that darkness.

It's sort of like how *Lord Of The Rings* is – you go to the land of the elves, which is very high fantasy and whimsical, then you go fight Sauron and it's dark, with lightning, clouds and evil. So having that juxtaposition in there is something that we're trying to aim for.

What has been the major impact of several notable changes to the core development team?
A lot of the high-profile members of the team changed and we got a lot of new people from other development teams outside to create this new core team. The remainder of the development team has stayed pretty much the same, so it wasn't like we had to start over from zero and tell everyone what to do – it was just taking it in a new direction with this new core team.

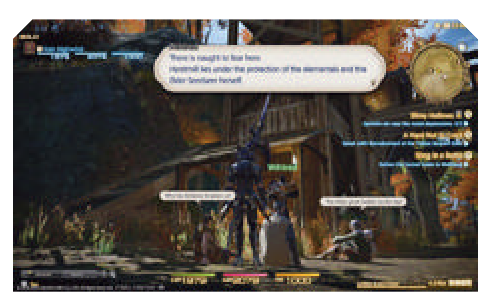
On top of this, there are two main points we'd like to clarify: when we decided to take the game in the direction of *A Realm Reborn*, we had to pretty much convince the development team to take the current version, continue to make updates to it for the current PC players and also make this new game. But once this new game is made, everything you're making over the next year or so will be thrown away because it will be completely replaced.

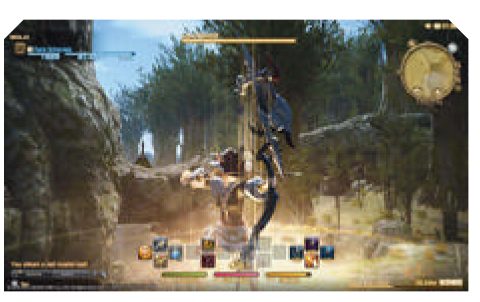
To motivate people when you're saying, 'You're going to be making something for a year then it'll be gone' was very difficult. But the team took this in its stride and has worked really hard for the past year, so for that we have to thank the team for their hard work. And if you look at the current version now, all the changes we've made since the original, you can see that they aren't changes people without motivation make. They've done a lot with the limited resources they have.

The second point – one of the most difficult things to do – was to basically educate the development team about the global standard of MMORPGs. A lot of people didn't know, so getting them up to 'Okay, this is what players expect from an MMORPG, this is the global standard'. And with *A Realm Reborn,* we want to get to this level and go beyond it.

> The whole team basically went and played EverQuest for a year

***FFXI* just hit its ten-year anniversary. What is it that *XI* got right that *XIV* was missing?**
One of the reasons we believe *XI* was so successful at its launch and is still successful now, ten years later, is that when they first started developing it and decided to develop it, the whole development team basically went and played *EverQuest* for a year, and were then thinking, 'We want to do what they do with *EverQuest* in the *Final Fantasy* series.' There were times when you couldn't contact people in the dev team unless you went into *EverQuest* to talk to them – that's how much they played. The thing was, because they did that they had the direction to go in, whereas one of the problems with the beginning of *Final Fantasy XIV* was there wasn't that direction.





The development team for *A Realm Reborn* has been advised to immerse itself fully in the existing world of MMORPGS.



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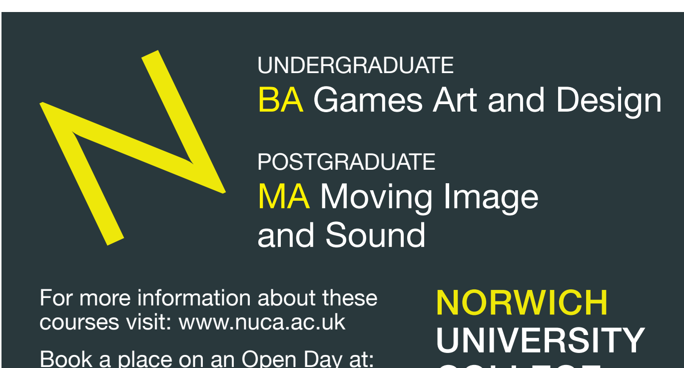
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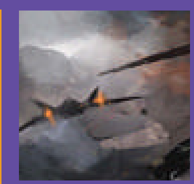




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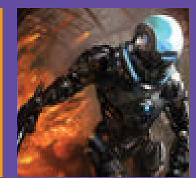
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